

## GEORGIA IN RUSSIAN POLICY

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For a long time now, the Russian and Georgian political elites have been engaged in information warfare. It has even been seen to occur in cycles and produce noxious emissions at regular intervals, which poison the relations between the two countries.

Today, the relations between the two sovereign states, which not so long ago belonged to the same country, are described using Cold War terms.

I have not posed myself the task of going back to the history of Russian-Georgian relations:

this would have called for a detailed analysis of the domestic reforms of the post-Soviet societies and the factors responsible for different vectors of their foreign policies.

Mine is a more modest task: I have undertaken to identify the political myths still current in Georgian-Russian relations as well as the reasons for their viability.

They come to the fore during periods when relations between the two countries worsen and mutual alienation and rejections take on radical tones.

## When the Sides Started Drifting Apart

In search of the possible causes of mutual alienation, let us take a look into the past.

We all know that one of the parts of the bipolar world disintegrated amid the failed perestroika reforms, because the “fathers of perestroika” did not realize that the convergence of two opposite systems and their coexistence within the “new thinking” of the communist and liberal ideologies were impossible. Under the global onslaught of liberalism, dogmatic Marxism had to retreat. The destruction of a system that could not respond to the challenges of the scientific and technological revolution raised an anti-wave that brought not only liberal-democratic ideas. The political elites of the young post-Soviet states were a weird symbiosis of Communist Party bureaucracy and nationalists. Radicalism, anti-Sovietism, and anti-communism served as the soil on which the ideologies of national self-identification flourished.

The states, particularly the young states, which had no “state-bureaucracy” or “state-nation” experience to rely on, had to start from scratch.

Their developing national ideologies had to move against the anti-wave and oppose not only the dying dogmatic Marxism, but also the globalistic highly ambitious ideologies. This caused the ethnic conflicts and civil war at the first stage of Georgia’s independence. It was then that Georgia’s political consciousness, patronizing in its nature, developed its main attitude—alienation from the patron of the latest two centuries of cultural and political experience. The events of 9 April, 1989 played an important role in the nation’s rejection of the old patron and started the process of the mythologization of the heroes who sacrificed themselves to the sociopolitical idea. They played an important role in mobilizing public opinion and in creating the halo of a charismatic leader. The nationalist-minded part of Georgia’s political elite (the Zviadists, followers of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first president of Georgia) developed the idea of “democratic Russia” as an heir to “imperial Russia.” Democratic Russia supported the “aggressive separatism” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which had split off from Georgia, while the latter was presented as a victim of confrontation between the Kremlin and the West.

Another group of Georgian experts believes that “aggressive separatism” and the Yeltsin regime that abetted it were the main reasons for the disagreements between Georgia and Russia. They argued that “the old patron” was merely punishing the “prodigal son who rejected his father.” There is also the opinion that in Abkhazia Russia was fighting Georgia in order to meddle with its independent development.

One thing is clear: the interstate contradictions are rooted in the early years of the states’ independence. It was at that time that the absent national ideology was replaced by political myths; the objective post-Soviet contradictions were aggravated by subjective reasons that bred mistrust and animosity. The post-Soviet leaders were acting on the momentum of the past; in the absence of new strategies or methodologies they had no choice but to lean on the Soviet mentality and totalitarian traditions. Mutual understanding was obviously lacking, even though the principles of international partnership received a lot of superficial support.<sup>1</sup>

Georgia acquired a hybrid government system that smacked of an authoritarian bias. Democratic institutions and values are still developing, but democracy is fairly contradictory. Some of the analysts describe it as “virtual democracy,” a product of the huge PR project of the Color Revolutions. Our researchers point out that democracy in Georgia is of a functional nature conditioned by political purposefulness; it serves the idea of restored territorial integrity. This is what the national project is

<sup>1</sup> See: A. Neklessa, “Ordo quardo: chetvrtiy poriadok: prishestvie postsovetskogo mira,” *Polis*, No. 6, 2000.

about. In the absence of a national idea, it is promoting PR projects using external resources and plays on the contradictions among the main actors engaged in another redivision of the spheres of influence in the Caucasus.

S. Lounev, who specialized in international affairs and writes extensively on Russia's policy in the Southern Caucasus, has identified several stages and pointed to their typical features. He is convinced that in the early 1990s, Russia had no clear strategy, there were merely "random responses to local developments rather than forecasting them, and voluntarism." On the whole, the Russian author describes Moscow's policy in the Southern Caucasus in the last decade as a complete failure: "The Russian Federation had no clear and balanced conception about its relations with the former Soviet republics. It was generally believed that they should either be forced back, that they were nothing more than a 'civilizational burden,' or that they should be left to their own devices for some time until they realized there was no alternative to a new alliance with Russia."

His conclusion is highly significant: "In this way Russia itself created unfriendly neighbors in the south," and "the situation began to gradually improve when Vladimir Putin came to power... Russia ... started acting more pragmatically," however, he added, there is no clear ideas about the future of the post-Soviet expanse in general and the Southern Caucasus in particular.<sup>2</sup>

His ideas are shared, to a certain extent, by Russia's academic community, which proceeds from an analysis of the relations between Moscow and Tbilisi to arrive at fairly radical conclusions. He insists that Russia should abandon Georgia as a lost country: there is no strong pro-Russian political force in Georgia. It will inevitably join NATO, since the absolute majority of the local people want this.<sup>3</sup>

These radical conclusions appeared in September-December 2006, at a time when the relations between the two countries were at their lowest. Here I shall discuss these ideas, as well as the interpretation of the events in Georgia and Russia.

Before going on, I would like to come back to the arguments offered above, which concluded with: "By withdrawing from Georgia, Russia will not lose much economically, the sub-region is of no particular interest to the RF." Some radically minded politicians go as far as suggesting that Russia should abandon the "formal principle" of Georgia's territorial integrity. They brandish the "strategic weapon" of Kosovo, which can be used in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. According to Director of the CIS Institute Konstantin Zatulin, this will make Russia's policy more open. Georgia's future NATO membership that "will make it Russia's enemy or rival will create numerous problems that are better avoided."<sup>4</sup>

There is another group that prefers the status quo: Russia should recognize the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity and insist on preserving the "frozen conflicts," which is especially advisable in view of the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. The members of this group support the idea of a "liberal empire," more active "economic intervention," and the efforts of preventing Georgia's NATO membership. They postulate the tactics of "relieving or increasing the sanctions against the recalcitrant neighbor depending on the situation."<sup>5</sup>

The politicians of both countries cannot ignore Georgia's domestic problems; there is another stumbling block: the Georgian leaders' efforts to resolve the "protracted conflicts" in a revolutionary way. The country's foreign policy orientation toward integration with NATO and the European Un-

<sup>2</sup> S. Lounev, «Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus: Geopolitical Value for Russia,» *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (39), 2006, pp. 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> See: Ibid., p. 26 (see also: A. Fomenko, "Na kholmakh Gruzii — nochnaia mgla," *Moskovskie novosti*, No. 45, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> K. Zatulin, "Pravo, v kotorom otkazali," *Materik, Institut SNG*, Bulletin No. 172, 15 July, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> M. Grigoriev, "Politika umirotvorenia M. Saakashvili vediot k bystromu vytesneniu Rossii," *Akademia trinitarizma*, Moscow, El No. 77, publication 13855, 5 October, 2006.

ion are closely associated with these intentions. Restored territorial integrity and the spread of Georgian sovereignty across its entire territory are two priorities, which makes NATO membership doubly important: this is a tool for guaranteed restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity and of democratic development and a final divorce with the Eurasian civilization. These messages have found their way into the ideological and PR set of ideas of the "color revolutionaries," who in 2004 and 2005 were talking about a "sanitary cordon around the reviving Russian 'liberal empire'."

It is in this context that the Georgian political elite is putting forward the conception of regional security in GUAM, TRACECA, and the Silk Roads system; the East-West transit energy routes and Georgia's return to the "European Home" as the "oldest European country." This is the dominant conception that serves as the cornerstone of Georgia's future independence on the global scale. Its desire to join the European Union and NATO is another manifestation of Georgia's devotion to democracy and freedom. There is a latent agreement that the old patron is not a paragon of democracy, therefore, Georgia and its relations with Russia will profit from the former's NATO and EU membership.<sup>6</sup>

## The Myths about the Split

In fact, it is in this sphere that the fields of tension, Cold War waves, and political myths appear to push the two countries apart.

These myths are applied to the charismatic leaders of the two states and give rise to various images, such as a "fair," "bold," and "heroic" bearer of the national ideas, "gatherer of the lands," or, on the other hand, a "perfidious enemy," "destroyer of order," or "pragmatic imperialist."

The formulas may change depending on the state of relations between the countries.

We all know that after the Rose Revolution, the President of Georgia was seen in Russia as a young and effective reformer, who offered friendship to the Russian leaders. Mikhail Saakashvili was greatly impressed by the Russian president when they met in February 2004. He was impressed by the modesty and flexibility of the Kremlin master. There was the impression that the two countries had entered a new stage of their bilateral, this time positive, relations.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin is seen as a strong and fair ruler who is restoring Russia's "autocracy" and grandeur. V. Degoev has written the following on that score: "V. Putin precisely fits Russia, its present state, problems and potential, fears and hopes. He is a leader whom the people trust, who is, on the whole, predictable and yet enigmatic."<sup>7</sup>

Mikhail Saakashvili himself is an inordinately active and energetic leader; he is more open, he is a populist inclined to theatricals. PR-shows have become an inalienable part of Georgia's political theater. As often happens, his merits are his demerits. In our case, it is not what the academic community thinks of the Georgian president and what he is doing—we are interested in what the public and the political class of Russia think of him.<sup>8</sup> After meeting Putin for the first time, the young Georgian president announced that he would learn from him how to govern the state.

The media even started calling him the "Georgian Putin."

The peaceful Rose Revolution that brought Saakashvili to power created the illusion that in Abkhazia and South Ossetia too, the road toward peaceful conflict settlement would be an easy one,

<sup>6</sup> Cf. N. Silaev, "GUAM and the Smaller Game in the Post-Soviet Expanse," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 4 (40), 2006.

<sup>7</sup> V. Degoev, "Eshcho raz o zagadke Putina," *Politicheskij klass*, No. 1, 2007, pp. 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> See: Art. Khachaturian, "Uspekhi M. Saakashvili. Politicheskij portret," *Moskovskie novosti*, No. 37, 2006; V. Tret'iakov, "Politicheskij dnevnik," *Politicheskij klass*, No. 10, 2006.

even though the conflicts there were described as highly complicated and protracted social conflicts. The “revolutionary attack” on Tskhinvali in the summer of 2004 blew away the myth of “revolutionary leader.” While accelerating the “chariot of the revolution” in the post-Soviet expanse, Mikhail Saakashvili stirred into action those who wanted to preserve the power of the “fathers of perestroika.” There were others who rejected the revolutionary methods. By that time, Russia had lived through an oligarchic “liberal-revolutionary wave” and started “gathering” the state and developing its sovereign democracy. The Russian politicians are working hard to restore the image of a state capable of embracing democracy and to revive its functions as a “union-forming” country.

The stages of post-Soviet development in both countries do not coincide. The Russian Federation set about strengthening its position on the ruins of the Soviet Union without a strategy or a conception (the quasi-conception of a “liberal empire” that described geo-economics as the foundation for developing the environment cannot be taken seriously). This explains why the “idealism” of Boris Yeltsin’s time was replaced with Vladimir Putin’s tough pragmatism. He failed to find common points with the PR methodology of the Color Revolutions and with the ideals of the revolutionary leaders resolved to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity by playing on the contradictions between the U.S. and the EU, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other.

Stronger sovereignty through Color Revolutions means rotation on the political Olympus, which destroys the old order and starts another round of squabbles over the spheres of influence in the Caucasus. At first, the newly elected president tried to accomplish this without Russia, then he brought in NATO, the EU, and other international organizations, which changed the format of the conflict settlement. Seen from Russia, which is caught between development stages (the “liberal-democratic” period has been left behind, while a new period has not yet been reached), such revolutionary measures looked misplaced and, worse, plain dangerous.

In Russia, he was seen less as a revolutionary who changed ideas than as a destroyer of order; at home the Georgian president acquired the image of “hero-builder.” His activities, however, cannot be described in unambiguous terms: he is a reformer, a builder of new Georgia, and a fighter against corruption, but he is moving away from democratic principles. Violence predominates in everything he does; his actions are less pragmatic, tend to be highly emotional, and are often incompetent. His excessive ambitions ignite him with a desire to become the leader in the post-Soviet expanse; he ignored the CIS standards and earned the fame of the “hero-destroyer.” At first the Russian political technologists spoke of him in positive terms. Gleb Pavlovskiy said that he was “not anti-Russian,” that he was “resolved to find a new way of restoring statehood and the economy on foreign money, after creating a manageable crisis” and that “bluffing was his style as a flexible and skilled improvisator” whose aim was “to create the illusion of a conflict between Russia and Georgia.”<sup>9</sup>

Later the attitude toward the political “actor” began to change: the Russian political elite was displeased with the problems he created in the “far south.” The impulsive and energetic Georgian president who, according to Kremlin political technologists Sergey Markov, Alexander Dugin and Gleb Pavlovskiy, was building up a “sanitary cordon” around Russia, caused nothing but negative feelings.

This gave rise to a myth that described the Georgian president as Moscow’s arch-enemy who followed in the footsteps of NATO and the West, which were moving into the post-Soviet expanse. It was not a random coincidence that President Saakashvili’s plummeting rating in Russia coincided with the great powers’ confrontation over the East-West energy projects and the desire of the Georgian leaders to make their country the main transit-country.

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<sup>9</sup> G. Pavlovskiy, “Saakashvili budet iskat’ i nakhodit’ vsio novye povody vyiti na obostrenie otnosheniy s Rossiey,” available at [www.sakartvelo.info], 17 August, 2004.

In the context of the Russia-the West opposition, Mikhail Saakashvili has acquired an “ominous image;” it was commonly believed that he would plant Western ideas in every post-Soviet corner. In September 2006, the Georgian authorities went to the extreme when trying to speed up the withdrawal of the Russian military bases from Georgia: they detained several Russian servicemen. This was the last straw: Russia’s patience was exhausted by what the “Georgian revolutionaries” were doing to settle their domestic problems and the disagreements with Russia. The Russian ambassador to Georgia was recalled; diplomatic relations were reduced to the minimum, and economic and other sanctions were introduced against the Georgian state.

“What does Saakashvili have to do with it?” asked the author of an article in *Kavkazskiy kur'er* that appeared on 8 November, 2006. The West and Russia were locked in a struggle over the Caucasus, or rather over spheres of influence in the region. Washington announced that it was disenchanted with Moscow.

In his article that appeared in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* on 5 October, 2006 entitled “Moskva-Tbilisi: blokada po vsem frontam” (Moscow-Tbilisi: Blockade Along all Fronts), Yu. Petrovskaia said that Georgia was pursuing an anti-Russian policy and had played its anti-Russian card to speed up its NATO membership. The author quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying in Strasbourg that Georgia did not meet the NATO criteria, which meant that its anti-Russian policy was being used as a claim to special treatment.

The idea the Georgia is still not ready to join the Alliance because of its undeveloped democracy, violations of human rights and the rights of national minorities, and the inability of the country’s leaders to deal with the conflicts has become an ideological weapon and a source of myths and brainwashing. Today, part of the Russian political elite is industriously tending to the myth about a republic with scanty natural resources that lost the chance of pursuing an independent policy and finding an identity of its own in global democracy. The myths about Georgia’s economic miracle, investment boom, the Georgian nation’s exclusiveness, and the noteworthy political tolerance demonstrated by the “revolutionary leaders of the oldest European country” are being dethroned. Some Russian political scientists, Konstantin Zatulin in particular, who relies on sociological polls which reveal the President of Georgia is losing popularity with his nation, are looking forward to a “Georgian de Gaulle” friendly toward the Kremlin.

The mythology of leaders has created a string of “heroes of our time” who perfectly fit the logic of a “manageable ruler.” Is it an echo of the “Big Brother” conception still popular in certain political circles? This highly consumerist idea is still fashionable in both capitals: it is more than a product of the totalitarian past—it was born by the crisis of the liberal-democratic ideology in the post-Soviet expanse.

Very much in the Cold War style, Mikhail Saakashvili was branded as a Russophobe and incompetent leader.

The analysts of the Russian weekly *Ekspert* offered a set of recommendations on how to oppose the anti-Russian policy of the Georgian president. It runs a section eloquently called “Gruzia protiv Rossii” (Georgia vs. Russia), which has detected in everything what “non-technological and unmanageable” Mikhail Saakashvili tries to do: he wants to wring dry the conflict with Russia by provoking it into aggressive actions to demonstrate to Georgia’s trans-Atlantic patron that “small democratic Georgia was the victim of the Russian monster.”

V. Ionov, a political analyst, has written: “The main audience of Georgian demarches is found in the United States,” while Saakashvili plays the card of the pagan “us and them” dichotomy. Mikhail Saakashvili has acquired the habit of turning to Europe for help: “What is going on in Russia is much more than a banal crisis in our bilateral relations. We have to deal with people who are recklessly playing the ethnic nationalist card. This is very dangerous, particularly for Russia. This is related to Europe and all of us.” According to the Russian author, Mikhail Saakashvili is trying to humiliate Russia and

damage its image as a democratic country by opposing it to Europe of which Georgia is part. When talking about the “asymmetric answer of Russia to Georgian provocations,” the author is obviously doubtful that “Saakashvili will profit from this. He will gain nothing. Russia, in turn, by reviving the already forgotten arguments has lost a lot.”<sup>10</sup> The “asymmetric answer” took the shape of an embargo on Georgian products, discontinued air and postal communication, and the deportation of illegal Georgian migrants.

Doubts were voiced. A. Privalov has written the following in the same journal: “One wonders: what are the final aims of Russia’s sanctions? It is very important to understand this: either it should address the problems in earnest (migration and the markets are contaminated with corruption) to move them aside together with the anti-Georgian context. There is another option: the sanctions develop into frills and turn out to be a small victorious war and the state school of chauvinism. This should be prevented lest they become not merely another faux pas (there have been enough of them) but an Error. Such games are easy to start and next to impossible to stop.” The analyst is quite right when he writes: “To tell the truth the crisis of our relations with Georgia was a shallow one. If we respond to it in this way what shall we do when a real crisis occurs?”<sup>11</sup>

A. Gromov, another expert, is looking for the roots of “anti-Georgian hysterics” elsewhere. He has asked: “What if the burning of bridges with Georgia is not a consequence, but the aim of Russia’s retaliation?” He believes that the fact that Russian policies oppose Georgia’s national interests is the main flaw of Russia’s policy in this country. This is true of the Russian ruling class’s negative attitude toward the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that strengthened, in his opinion, Georgia’s economic and political independence. By supporting the project, Russia could have created pro-Russian forces among the Georgian elite. The territorial issue is Georgia’s main concern, writes the Russian analyst, Russia should have worked toward preserving the status quo. Instead, it sided with the separatists. These were, in his opinion, systemic errors in Russia’s policy in Georgia during the post-Soviet period.

A. Gromov’s recommendations are paradoxical: he believes that Saakashvili acted with the aim of strengthening the anti-Russian national consensus and mobilizing the nation around himself. The analyst suggests starting a new game by proclaiming Russia an “anti-Georgian state.” This will deprive the Georgian leaders of their trump card, while the president will be forced to revise his tactics amid one of the most serious crises—any more or less serious move would have deprived him of Abkhazia and South Ossetia forever.<sup>12</sup>

Russian analysts are doing their best to find other reasons of the worsened relations between Russia and Georgia. Some of them are convinced that “Russia does not know why it needs Georgia, with all its huge problems of building up its statehood, at all.” Russia is building its policy in its opposition to the United States. P. Bykov and A. Gromov insist that “members of Russian power are not prepared to work with independent pro-Russian politicians” in Georgia. They have written: “Opposing America and the Color Revolutions became Russia’s total political idea across the post-Soviet expanse to the extent that it practically deprived it of the chance of creating a pro-Russian political force loyal to revolution.”

These authors are convinced that Mikhail Saakashvili tried to become the “Georgian Putin,” to restore his country’s territorial and statehood integrity yet failed to find the common tongue with the Kremlin. “He has succeeded in establishing the regime of personal power and creating a more or less effective army with American help. This separated Russia and Georgia even more.”

The authors of the article “Sredstvo iz arsenala real politic” believe that the “frozen conflicts” issue reduce the compromise potential to the minimum and conclude: “Today Russia is facing the

<sup>10</sup> V. Ionov, “Zagranitsa nam pomozhet,” *Ekspert*, 17 October, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> A. Privalov, “O nas, a ne o Gruzii,” *Ekspert*, 9 October, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> See: A. Gromov, “Smysl antigruzinskoi isterii,” *Ekspert*, 5 October, 2006.

challenging task of creating a new balance in its relations with Georgia and Georgia's Western partners—the U.S. and the EU."<sup>13</sup>

The critics of the Georgian president speak of his actions as “a theatre of the absurd.” A. Konovalov, president of the Institute of Strategic Research, insists that Mikhail Saakashvili is frantically looking for a way out of the political impasse—the actual and legal return of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Georgia—only to discover to his disappointment that neither Russia, nor the U.S., nor NATO are prepared to use force or throw their weight around to resolve the conflict for him.<sup>14</sup> The Georgian president is fully aware of the quandary in which he and his republic have found themselves. He cannot use ultimatums (related to Russia's WTO membership, for example) as an anti-Russian weapon. “Tbilisi is not counting on a positive outcome of the protracted confrontation; nor does it probably want it—this will deprive it of the chance of turning to NATO for protection.”<sup>15</sup>

Russian analysts are calling on the Kremlin to abandon the myth-based Georgian policy and the remnants of the obsolete “Big Brother” policy and launch a much more pragmatic course, while not allowing the state's leaders to exceed “the limits of the acceptable and the possible.”<sup>16</sup>

Experts regard Georgia as a developing state with numerous problems, low economic development level, and limited economic and political resources. They are absolutely convinced that the “myth of an economic miracle” (which implies the republic's transit-service future) is unfounded. The Georgian “revolutionary leaders,” meanwhile, are engaged in looking for geopolitical sources of the country's capitalization and foreign investments (from Russia among other countries) needed to privatize the main industrial sectors (including strategic industries). The country's military structure and the authoritarian regime are receiving the lion's share of the newly found money. The social gap, which is wide enough as it is, is widening even more, the ruling class lacks the necessary cohesion, and the democratic institutions and values are undeveloped. This has forced the leaders to tighten their authoritarian grip on the state, look for fresh confirmation of their legitimacy in the West, and try to accelerate the country's membership in NATO.

According to Russian experts, this is going on against the background of the Georgian president's “improvisations,” who is meting out both peace initiatives and hostile anti-Russian steps. The Kremlin is being called upon to use all its foreign policy resources to make Russia's Georgian policy “strong, reactive, and responsive; Russia should drop its gallantry and niceties” together with the myth about special relations with the republic.

### *In Lieu of a Conclusion*

The post-Soviet myths are finding fertile ground in the contradictory developments of the post-Soviet political and economic systems. They are transitional and are giving rise to opposition to various trends, which is moving “stable instability” to the fore. Georgia's policy is tied to the negative segment of Russia-the West relations by its desire to profit from their political confrontation. Georgian-Russian relations remain engulfed by the anti-wave—there are still no positive ideals in this sphere. Georgia's process of political self-identification is far from complete, while Russia's Georgian policy, as well as its policy in the rest of the Caucasus, remains inconsistent.

The development vectors of the two countries, as well as their approaches to conflict settlement, are very different. This has been amply testified by their interpretation of the “alternative governments”

<sup>13</sup> *Ekspert*, 9 October, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> See: A. Konovalov, “Esli ne vrugi, to kto?!” *Moskovskie novosti*, No. 42, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> A. Bagrationi, “My ne sumasshedshie!” *Moskovskie novosti*, No. 43, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> A. Skakov, “Krasnaia cherta dlia Tbilisi,” *Politicheskii zhurnal*, No. 37-38, 9 October, 2006.

in the conflict zones and the current formats of conflict settlement. The two countries do not agree on how to develop their relations, while the political technologists on both sides of the border insist on the enemy image. No neutral position is possible (the attempt to suggest that Georgia assume a neutral position failed); the same can be said about retaining a normal level of relations. Personal meetings between the two presidents failed to defuse the tension. In her interview to the *Expert* weekly, Speaker of the Georgian parliament Nino Burjanadze said: "The problems are created by different approaches to certain fundamental issues rather than the presidents' personal mutual dislike." Ms. Burjanadze had in mind Russia's unwillingness to see Georgia united and integrated into the European structures.<sup>17</sup>

In response, Russian analysts stress what President Putin has to say about Mikhail Saakashvili. He pointed out that there was continuity between the policies of the president-revolutionary and those of Stalin's minister of state security, Lavrentiy Beria. The Russian president said: "There is an obvious desire to pinch and provoke Russia" and concluded: "These people imagine that, protected by their foreign sponsors, they can feel comfortable and secure. But can they?"<sup>18</sup>

The latest meeting between the two presidents took place in St. Petersburg. Their contacts are still "consistently cool," but the sanction conditions have been alleviated somewhat. The main problems still exist, with no solution in sight. The thaw that followed the dangerous crisis of September-December 2006 was probably a tactical one. More likely than not it will be followed by another spiral of information warfare in which political myths will continue playing their destructive role and eating into cultural and political foundation created by centuries of joint existence in the same civilizational space.

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<sup>17</sup> *Expert*, 16 November, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 2 October, 2006.