RUSSIA AND GEORGIA: POST-SOVIET METAMORPHOSES OF MUTUAL RELATIONS

Malkhaz MATSABERIDZE

D.Sc. (Political Science), professor
at the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
(Tbilisi, Georgia)

The post-Soviet relations between Russia and Georgia are best described as complicated and contradictory. Indeed, the less than two decades of post-Soviet history include several different but logically connected periods. This means that anyone wishing to better understand the nature of the relations between the two countries and the meaning of their current stage should grasp

their logic. Put in a nutshell it means that Russia still hopes to preserve the tools of its influence on Georgia, while Georgia is seeking a civilized model of relations with Russia. Georgian officials describe it as respect for Russia's "legal interests" in the region and protection of Georgia's national and state interests.

Georgia's official position expounded below, with which the present author agrees, is open for discussion.

Attempted Restoration of Georgia's Independence through Negotiations with the Soviet Leaders

By the late 1980s the national-liberation movement had created a context in which it became clear that Georgia should restore its state independence; this meant that Moscow was expected to recognize the fact of occupation and annexation of Georgia and that the international community should help Georgia overcome their negative repercussions.

During Gorbachev's perestroika, when the Soviet regime became slightly more liberal than before, the Georgians awakened to their past. The Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921) was the object of numerous publications in Georgian non-official periodicals that stirred up the idea of restored independence; on many occasions the public agreed on the nature of a future independent Georgian state.

Under the agreement of 7 May, 1920 the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic recognized the independence of the Georgian Democratic Republic. Some time later the Red Army attacked Georgia, occupied the country after a short war in February-March 1921, and established Soviet power. Later Soviet Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet Union. Much has been already written about these events.[1] Georgia tried to restore its independence through talks with Russia on the strength of the developments of 1920-1921. It was expected that Russia would recognize the fact of Georgia's occupation and annexation by the Red Army and of Georgia's incorporation into the Soviet Union against its will. This recognition should have been accompanied by liquidation of the results of aggression and restoration of Georgia's state independence.

The victory of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's Round Table—Free Georgia Bloc at the parliamentary elections of 28 October, 1990 shifted the idea into the sphere of practical policy: after coming to power the new president officially announced that the country had entered a period of transition toward restored independence.[2]

Moscow never responded to Tbilisi's demands to recognize the facts of occupation and annexation; the Soviet government, which refused to recognize Georgia's independence in principle, was building up tension in the country.[3] The Decision of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. on the referendum on the Soviet Union's continued existence scheduled for17 March, 1991 quenched the hopes that the Soviet leaders would admit the facts of aggression and annexation.

---

[1] L. Toidze's definitive work *I interventsia, i okkupatsia, i nasil'stvennaia sovetizatsia, i fakticheskaia anneksia. K otsenke voyny fevralia-marta 1921 goda mezhdu Gruziey i Rossiey,* Tbilisi, 1991 deserves special mention.

[2] On 14 November, 1990 Zviad Gamsakhurdia said at a Supreme Soviet of Georgia session: "After Soviet Russia occupied and annexed Georgia," the government of the Georgian Democratic Republic did not sign an act of capitulation, which means that "legally the independent state of Georgia and its Constitution still exist." "Georgia is an annexed country that began liquidating the results of annexation and is restoring its independent statehood." "There is another question: Georgia should be recognized as an occupied country, which means that the Soviet army is the army of a foreign country. We should raise the question at the international legal level of withdrawal of the Soviet occupation forces from Georgia. We should start negotiations with the Center and the Western countries" (*Politika,* No. 2, 1990, p. 11).

[3] See: *History of Georgia. 20th Century. Textbook for Department of History Students,* Tbilisi, 2003, p. 231 (in Georgian).

Restored Independence and Confrontation with Russia (1991-1993)

Georgia boycotted the "all-Union" referendum of 17 March, 1991; on 31 March it carried out its own referendum to ask its citizens: Do you want to restore the country's independence on the strength of the Independence Act of 26 May, 1918? On 9 April, 1991 independence was restored.

The country, which considered itself independent de jure, remained de facto part of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union and later the Russian Federation responded to the declaration of independence with an active support of the separatist Abkhazian and Ossetian sentiments. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was removed; simultaneously, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Georgia was plunged into a civil war exacerbated by the war in Abkhazia. Under the guise of so-called ethnic conflicts Russia waged an aggressive war against Georgia that involved, more or less openly, so-called North Caucasian volunteers.[4]

Eduard Shevardnadze, who came to power after Zviad Gamsakhurdia, reconciled himself to the fact of separatist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and their de facto annexation by Russia under the guise of a peacekeeping mission. He even joined the CIS despite the opposition's vehement protests.[5]

It turned out, however, that Russia had much more aggressive designs with respect to Georgia. According to Shevardnadze, during his visit to Moscow in December 1993 Russia's Defense Minister Pavel Grachev unfolded a map in which Georgia was divided into the West ruled by Gamsakhurdia and the East by Shevardnadze. The former president added that he had avoided this variant with the help of then President of Ukraine Kravchuk.[6]

President Shevardnadze had to take into consideration military defeat and the position of a large part of the former communist Moscow-oriented nomenklatura who had returned to power and believed that "confrontation with Russia" started under Gamsakhurdia was a bad mistake.

The Georgian public, in turn, regarded the CIS as a "modernized Soviet Union" and interpreted Georgia's CIS membership as another period of occupation.[7] As distinct from February-March 1921, neither was the CIS a copy of the Soviet Union, nor did Georgia suffer a complete military-political defeat even though it looked as if it had been returned to the post-Soviet Russian orbit.

---

[4] In his memoirs Eduard Shevardnadze writes about "the undeclared war with Russia" and cites numerous facts of Russia's direct aggression. He wrote: "The war with Russia in Abkhazia was one of the dirtiest, cruelest, and most inhuman wars, during which people were tortured and killed because of their ethnic origin, their houses were burned down, their property taken away from them, and they were forced to leave Abkhazia" (E. Shevardnadze, *Pondering Over the Past and Future. Memoirs,* Tbilisi, 2006, p. 430, in Georgian).

[5] On this score the former Georgian president has written: "The situation was hopeless. Russia accomplished its dirty plans—the country was on the verge of disaster. There was no alternative. I was forced to accept a compromise: Georgia had to become a member of the Russia-controlled 'Commonwealth of Independent States" (E. Shevardnadze, op. cit., pp. 432-433). From the very beginning the Georgian public accused Eduard Shevardnadze of serving Russia's interests and bringing the country to defeat in order to return it to the RF's orbit. Leader of the Popular Front N. Natadze accused Shevardnadze of acting on Russia's orders, and "together with Ardzinba, he deliberately organized a war and just as deliberately brought it to defeat" (N. Natadze, *What I Know,* Tbilisi, 2002, p. 298, in Georgian).

[6] See: E. Shevardnadze, op. cit., pp. 434-453.

[7] In October 1995 well-known Georgian public figure Akakiy Bakradze pointed out that the CIS "is an attempt to return to Russia everything that it lost as a result of the Soviet Union's disintegration. It is an attempt to restore the large Russian empire under the new conditions" (A. Bakradze, *Works,* Vol. 7, Tbilisi, 2005, p. 638, in Georgian). He also said: "We all know only too well that there were no Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Osset conflicts. There were Russia's interests in Georgia, which it promoted by occupying these territories. It naturally capitalized on certain sentiments that existed among the Abkhazians and Ossets and channeled them against the Georgians. It was Russia that supervised the process for the sake of its political aims" (ibid., p. 640).

An Attempt to Restore Territorial Integrity with Russia's Help (1994-1998)

The new period in relations between the two countries began when Georgia joined the CIS and signed the so-called framework agreement with the Russian Federation. It was a new version of the Georgievsk Treaty of sorts when Georgia exchanged Russia's military presence on its territory for Moscow's assistance in building up its armed forces and restoring territorial integrity in particular. Whereas in 1783 (when the Treaty of Georgievsk was signed) Russia acted against Turkey and Iran by helping Georgia restore its territorial integrity, in the 20th century it was expected to abandon the separatist regimes of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali to their fate in order to make them more flexible at the negotiation table and finally determine their status within Georgia. This explains the inordinate popularity of the formula "the keys to Abkhazia are found in Moscow" among the Georgian leaders.

There were enough enthusiasts in Georgia in favor of "settling the problems with Russia's help," as well as those who believed the course to be erroneous, not to say pernicious. Later developments confirmed that the pessimists were right: Russia, which chose to ignore the republic's national-state interests, undermined Georgia's pro-Russian orientation.

Tbilisi was seeking the Kremlin's good will in vain. Russia did nothing to help the republic build up its armed forces, nor did it promote talks with the separatists. The State Duma did not ratify the framework agreement signed in Tbilisi. Moscow did not deem it necessary to take Georgia's interests into account, or it was convinced that restored territorial integrity would deprive it of its manipulation tools. Everything the Russian politicians and analysts were saying at that time showed that they never regarded Georgia as a factor to be reckoned with; Russian geopoliticians never discussed the territorial integrity issue, but instead looked forward to the republic's further fragmentation.

The events of May 1998 in the Gali District confirmed beyond a doubt that Russia's mediation was not the key to conflict settlement. It was expected that Georgia would restore its control over the district with the Kremlin's tacit consent, however the operation ended in disaster: the separatists drove away thousands of people who returned to their homes.

The Shevardnadze government continued seeking "the keys to conflict settlement in Moscow" even after the Gali catastrophe, but success looked less and less possible. Since 1999 relations between the two countries have been rapidly going downhill under the pressure of the following factors:

- The beginning of second Chechen war in which Georgia did not support Russia;
- Projects for transiting Caspian energy resources;
- The beginning of withdrawal of the Russian military bases from Georgian territory to which Russia was forced to agree at the Istanbul OSCE summit in 1999.[8]

Maneuvering between Russia and the West (1998-2003)

Since the late 1990s Shevardnadze has been exhibiting clear determination to maneuver between Russia and the West; the first signs of his new course, however, could be observed even earlier. At first, his Westward movement was hesitant; however in 1998 the Western bias became obvious mainly because of the planned transit of Caspian energy resources across Georgia. The decision on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline had been reached earlier; and the Baku-Supsa pipeline was commissioned in

[8] See: *History of Georgian Diplomacy,* Tbilisi, 2003, pp. 632-633 (in Georgian).

1999. It was planned to lay another pipeline across Georgia to connect Baku and Erzurum in Turkey. President Shevardnadze has written that "Russia could not accept the transit routes across Georgia and did everything—openly or clandestinely—to thwart the plans."[9]

The Georgian authorities intensified their efforts to involve the West in conflict settlement and normalization of their relations with Moscow; they demonstrated no mean activity in GUAM, in November 2002 President Shevardnadze made public his country's NATO ambitions, but the president took the trouble to balance out his Westward bias with concessions to the Kremlin.

This was done for the sake of continued stability and because of the desire to finally achieve a balance between the interests of the large states in the region. President Shevardnadze's opponents ascribed his downfall to his foreign policy course. According to A. Chikvaidze, foreign minister of Shevardnadze's time, his regime fell because its foreign policy of the last few years was "insubstantial, it lacked principles, and was absolutely pointless."[10]

The Rose Revolution and an Attempt to Hastily Integrate with the West (2003-2008)

Toward the end of the Shevardnadze regime criticism of the "maneuvering policies" intensified. A lot was said about the president's indecision when it came to drawing closer to the West. Mikhail Saakashvili and his government brought to power by the Rose Revolution steered the country toward rapid integration with the West and openly supported the velvet revolutions across the CIS. Russia was irritated despite the new regime's obvious intention to improve bilateral relations: a fresh start and open doors to Russian money were meant to be a sugar-coated pill to help Russia accept Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

This period was full of ups and downs in the two countries' bilateral relations: there were "thaws" as well as Moscow's economic sanctions against Georgia and rising tension in the conflict areas.

The Georgian authorities never hesitated to inform the world about Russia's "creeping aggression" and its attempts at annexing parts of Georgia's territory.

The course toward rapid integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures declared by the new rulers brought to power by the Rose Revolution failed; the country's pro-Western orientation did not help it restore its territorial integrity, however Western support became more tangible.

Today, the relations between Georgia and Russia have once more reached a critical point. Russia has recognized the separatist regimes in Georgia, thus confirming the fact that Russia's peacekeeping was nothing more than a smokescreen for its annexationist intentions.

---

[9] E. Shevardnadze, op. cit., p. 451. Eduard Shevardnadze recalls his conversation over the phone with Boris Yeltsin the day after the failed assassination on 9 February, 1998, during which the president of Russia insisted that Georgia reject the project designed to move Caspian fuels across its territory. "Yeltsin used the tone of a first secretary of the C.C. communist party as if he were instructing a secretary of a republican communist party," writes Shevardnadze. His demand was left unheeded: "No matter how great Russia's threat was, I could not betray the interests of Georgia, go against my word to Aliev, or turn away from Turkey and the United States that supported us" (pp. 455-456).

[10] A. Chikvaidze, *Political Chess Games,* Tbilisi, 2004 (in Georgian). According to the author, "during the last five years Shevardnadze 'changed' his political priorities all the time. The inverted commas mean that the dangerous game between Russia and America, the never-ending stream of lies from one side or the other, and the hilariously wide amplitudes never fit into the priorities range… Naturally enough Moscow and Washington finally abandoned their unreliable and hardly determined partner" (p. 318).