

რუსეთის საგარეო პოლიტიკა საქართველოსთან მიმართებაში 2000 წლის ვლადიმერ პუტინის არჩევნებისა და 2003 წლის ვარდების რევოლუციის პერიოდში

რუსო რიჩარდი
ხაზარის უნივერსიტეტი

1991 წლის საქართველოს დამოუკიდებლობის აღიარების და 2000 წლის მარტში რუსეთის პრეზიდენტად ვლადიმერ პუტინის არჩევის შემდეგ ქვეყნის საგარეო პოლიტიკა რეგიონში მნიშვნელოვანწილად იმართებოდა რუსული ინტერესებიდან გამომდინარე და მისი როლი აღიქმებოდა, როგორც მედიატორის როლი ეთნიკურ დისკუსიებში. რუსეთისთვის კავკასიის როგორც „სასიცოცხლო მნიშვნელობის მქონე ზონად“ დასახელება ხსნის რუსეთის მიერ საქართველოს საშინაო საქმეებში ჩარევას. მეორეს მხრივ, ეთნო-პოლიტიკურმა კონფლიქტებმა, პოლიტიკურმა არასტაბილურობამ, ჯერ კიდევ არამყარმა პოლიტიკურმა სტრუქტურებმა და რუსეთზე ეკონომიკურმა დამოკიდებულებამ განაპირობა, რომ საქართველო ჯერ კიდევ დაუცველია რუსეთის მხრიდან ზეწოლისა და მანიპულირებისაგან. 2000 წელს, როდესაც რუსეთის პრეზიდენტად ვლადიმერ პუტინი აირჩიეს, კრემლმა კიდევ უფრო გააძლიერა საქართველოს კონტროლი. მთავარი მიზანი იყო თბილისს აეღო პრორუსული საგარეო პოლიტიკის ხაზი. აღნიშნული სტატია იკვლევს იმ მეთოდებს, რომელსაც კრემლი იყენებდა საქართველოს დასამორჩილებლად 2000-დან 2003 წლამდე, როდესაც საქართველოს პრეზიდენტად მიხეილ სააკაშვილი აირჩიეს.

Dimensions of Russian Foreign Policy towards Georgia between Vladimir Putin's 2000 Election and the 2003 Rose Revolution

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Ever since it declared independence in 1991, Georgia has found that its historic ties with Russia have complicated its search for an identity at the international level. This has complicated Georgia's foreign policy for more than a decade. Georgia has moved back and forth between a strategy of distancing itself from the Russian sphere of influence, striving for even better relations with the United States and Europe, and seeking, even if reluctantly, some sort of accommodation with Russia.

Thus it would be fair to describe the tangled relations between Russia and Georgia as tense, delicate and highly vulnerable. The range of thorny problems – namely, the long term existence of Russian military bases on Georgian territory, Moscow's involvement in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian companies' nearly total control of the Georgian energy sector, controversy over the energy transit routes from the Caspian Sea region, the war in Chechnya and Moscow's position on the alleged presence of Chechen fighters in what it called the "lawless" Pankisi Gorge – continue to systematically poison the relationship between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Geopolitically, Russia views the South Caucasus in general and Georgia in particular, as a region vital to its national interests. Exercising geostrategic and economic control over Georgia – a key transit country – has been, and continues to be, the paramount objective of Moscow's strategic planners. It is only natural that Russia has pursued a combination of policies (the imposition of a unilateral visa regime in December 2000, cutting off energy supplies and backtracking on commitments to withdraw Russia's military bases from Georgia) to discourage Georgia from acting on its pro-Western leanings. Georgia desires to join NATO and become a member of the European Union (EU); participates in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project; and is part of the Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova (GUAM) organization, widely regarded by Moscow as an obstacle to its integrationist plans.

When Vladimir Putin was elected Russia's President in 2000, the Kremlin became increasingly focused on manipulating and controlling Georgia. The objective was to force Tbilisi to toe a pro-Russian foreign policy line. To achieve this, Moscow was willing to resort not only to the

threat of using raw force but much subtler tools – including political and economic blackmail – that have become part of the now commonly called “soft powers.”

I. Main Problematic Areas between Georgia and Russia during Putin's First Term

As briefly explained in the introduction, there were various problems that strained Russian-Georgian relations between 2000 and 2003:

- The existence of Russian military bases on Georgian territory
- Tension in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia
- The alleged presence of Chechen rebels in the Pankisi Gorge
- Russian companies' monopoly in the Georgian energy sector
- The energy transit routes running across Georgia from the Caspian Sea region.

We will examine each of these issues in turn.

Russian Bases on Georgian Territory

Russia agreed to withdraw its four military bases in Georgia under an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) summit agreement when it adopted the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) (The CFE Treaty, 1990), in Istanbul on 19 November 1999, following a Russian-Georgian statement to this effect in November 1994 (Boese, 1999, November).

The CFE Treaty, among other things, imposed equal limits on the tanks, armoured combat vehicles (ACVs), heavy artillery, combat aircraft and attack helicopters that NATO and the former Warsaw Pact countries could possess between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural Mountains. Aimed at preventing arms build-ups for surprise *blitzkrieg*-type offensives, the treaty employed a concentric-zone system which mandated smaller deployments of tanks, ACVs and artillery the closer one moved toward the frontline between the alliances. To guard against offensives designed to bypass central Europe, specific ‘flank zone’ limits restricted weapons stationed in northern and southern Europe. The treaty adaptation agreement on November 19, 1999 overhauled the outdated, Cold War-era structure of the original treaty. While proclaiming the adapted treaty will “enhance peace, security and stability throughout Europe,” U.S. President Bill Clinton said he would not submit it for Senate approval until Russia complies with weapons ceilings set out in the revised treaty. Moscow, whose war in Chechnya in 2004-2006 had only magnified Russia's perennial non-compliance with CFE flank-zone limits, had said it will comply as soon as possible.

The Vaziani and Gudauta bases, under the CFE Treaty, were to be vacated by 1 July 2001, with further consultations to decide the dates for the evacuation of the Batumi and Akhalkalaki bases. Russia left Vaziani and Gudauta in accordance with CFE stipulations but did not withdraw from the other two: Batumi (in Adjara) and Akhalkalaki (in Samtskhe-Javakheti) (Mukhin, 2000; Pravda, 2001; Rosbalt, 2002; Rosbalt, 2004). The Georgian authorities demanded that Russia evacuate its bases in accordance with the CFE Treaty while Russia argued that it had already reduced by several hundred units the heavy military hardware at its remaining bases in Batumi and Akhalkalaki and that it needed 11 more years for a complete withdrawal.

Furthermore, two other groups of Russian military forces, under the aegis of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping operations, were deployed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while some more Russian troops were positioned in Gyumri in Armenia. The main concerns about the Russian military presence in Georgia were, firstly, the possibility of Russian intervention in Georgia's internal affairs and, secondly, the Russian tendency not to maintain its declared neutrality.

These issues remained the main causes of friction between Russia and Georgia under both Presidents' Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili administrations. As Igor Torbakov mentioned in an article published in *Eurasianet* (Torbakov, 2004), "Moscow Views Military Withdrawal Issue as Litmus Test for Georgian-Russian Relations," Russia tended to see the base issue as a litmus test for the future of bilateral relations, while the Georgian side viewed it as a test of Russia's sincerity in resolving the other important problems between the two states.

This issue was one of the main items on the agenda when President Saakashvili visited Russia in February 2004 (Blagov, 2004). Although, little progress was achieved, Saakashvili explained that "this issue is important to Georgia but we can't allow it to darken our relations."

1.2. South Ossetia and Abkhazia

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to large-scale armed conflicts in a number of the newly independent states. Since each conflict in the region has its own causes, it is very difficult to generalize on the sources and driving forces behind them. However, it is also very hard to analyze each individual conflict separately because many regional conflicts are closely interrelated and affect each other in different ways.

Difficulty in state formation and complex border delimitation and territorial claims were the main factors contributing to the emergence of the conflicts in the post-Soviet space. The existence of some common characteristics complicated the resolution of conflicts in the region: lack of experience of and structures for independent government; the lack of

national armies; unresolved territorial and regional disputes; the presence of Russian armed forces in most of the regional countries. The picture gets even more complicated if we take into account Russia's political and security interests, its desire for strategic dominance and the fate of the Russian diaspora in the new independent states (Shanin, 1989; Yamskov, 1991; Baranovsky, 1993, p.95, 131; Goldenberg, 1994, p. 4).

The Ossetians joined Russia in 1774 and, in June 1920, South Ossetia declared its independence as a Soviet Republic. Georgia sent its army to crush what it saw as a South Ossetian uprising challenging the territorial integrity of Georgia. Russia protested against this action, considering it as an intervention into South Ossetian internal affairs. The South Ossetians saw this as a denial of their right to self-determination, while the Georgians continue until this day to view these events as the Ossetians' first attempt to seize Georgian territory and Russia's first attempt to destabilize Georgia by encouraging South Ossetia to secede. In 1921, the Red Army invaded Georgia and annexed it. In 1922, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast within Georgia was declared, with Tskhinvali as its capital city. It remained an Autonomous Oblast within Georgia under Soviet rule, having strong ties with the North Ossetian Autonomous Region in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Shukman, 1988, p. 234-235).

In September 1990 the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast declared independence as the South Ossetian Democratic Soviet Republic, appealing to Russia to recognize it as an independent subject of the Soviet Union. The South Ossetians boycotted the elections for the Georgian Supreme Council in October 1990 and held elections for their own parliament in December. However, the Georgian Supreme Council cancelled the results of that election and voted to abolish the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast as a separate administrative unit within the Republic of Georgia.

Following violent incidents in and around Tskhinvali, the Georgian Parliament declared a state of emergency in the Tskhinvali and Java regions of South Ossetia on December 12, 1990. In the first days of 1991, the Supreme Council of Georgia passed a law forming the National Guard of Georgia. A few days later, Georgian troops entered Tskhinvali. In the spring of 1992 the fighting escalated, with Russian involvement. A ceasefire was agreed upon and in July 1992 a CIS peacekeeping operation began, consisting of a Joint Control Commission and joint CIS-Georgian-South Ossetian military patrols. The Georgians claimed that the Russian army helped and supplied the Ossetians several times during the conflict (Jones, 1996; Fuller, 1997, February 7). After a short war between Georgian and Russian military forces in August 2008, the region's status within Georgia is still unclear.

One of the South Ossetian separatists' initial demands was unification with the autonomous region of North Ossetia. There were two important aspects to the conflict which affect Georgia-Russia relations. The first was the potential threat that South Ossetian independence and autonomy demands could spill over the border and create problems for Russia in North Ossetia. Russia was very concerned about finding a solution to this problem and had tried to slow down migration from South to North Ossetia by giving South Ossetians Russian citizenship, colloquially called "passportization." The introduction of a visa system with Georgia allowed the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to travel freely to Russia (Kandelaki, 2003, February 7; Torbakov, 2003). The other aspect of the South Ossetian conflict was South Ossetia's proximity to Chechnya and the Pankisi Gorge. The proximity of Georgian forces to South Ossetia and its capital Tskhinvali created anxiety and tension in the region.

Tbilisi and Tskhinvali have been in confrontation since the 1991-1992 conflict. Although there was no pact to define South Ossetia's political relations with Tbilisi, the conflict remained frozen until President Saakashvili announced that he would try to re-establish Georgia's territorial integrity. When President Saakashvili tried to repeat the Adjara solution (Areshidze, 2004) in South Ossetia by exerting economic pressure on the regional leadership during the Summer of 2004 (Tbilisi took action to curtail the smuggling of Russian goods to Georgia via South Ossetia and extended humanitarian assistance to Ossetian villages), an armed confrontation occurred between the two sides which resulted in the creation of a Joint Peacekeeping Force to keep the two sides apart.

Russia got involved in the dispute as well. Initially it used its influence within the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to prevent Georgia from organizing an international conference on the issue and expanding the OSCE monitoring efforts in the region. Later, representatives from Russia and Georgia came together to form the Joint Control Commission. However, the South Ossetian problem remained a sticky issue between Georgia and Russia (Devdariani, 2004, November 3).

Unlike South Ossetia, Abkhazia held the status of an Autonomous Republic under Soviet rule and thus had a stronger sense of sovereignty and independence. Furthermore, the Abkhazian call for autonomy or separation from Georgia was not a post-independence issue. Abkhazia was incorporated into the Russian empire in 1810 as a protectorate and was finally annexed in 1864. Many Abkhaz fled and many Russians and Georgians arrived in the years which followed. After the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Abkhazia gained a measure of autonomy until Stalin incorporated it into Georgia in 1931. Georgian became the official language and the Abkhaz language and cultural rights were suppressed. Many Georgians were settled there. However, this repression eased substan-

tially after Nikita Khrushchev came to power in the Kremlin (Hosking, 1992, p.326-362).

The conflict in Abkhazia between the Abkhaz and the Georgians has continued for centuries, with each group accusing the other of victimization and discrimination. In 1990 the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet attempted to upgrade Abkhazia to a full Union Republic, but the Georgian Parliament annulled this. When Georgia became independent, supporters of a break with Georgia and either independence or closer ties with Russia became more active. Tension rose and, in 1992, Georgia sent troops to enforce the status quo (Schmidt, 1993). In late 1993, Georgian troops were driven out amidst fierce fighting. Abkhazia declared independence early in 1994, but it has never been recognized as independent. An economic embargo was put in force, leaving Abkhazia isolated from all but Russia, which, until the 2008 August War, maintained a border crossing and reopened the railway line to Sukhumi. Russia further infuriated Georgia by making it easy for Abkhazians to gain Russian citizenship (the second case of "passportization").

Between 2000 and 2004, Russia did not recognize Abkhazia as an independent state, but 75% of Abkhazia's residents were given Russian passports and received Russian pensions, which also helped the region's economic development. Analysts argued that Russia was keen to keep its foothold in Abkhazia to maintain leverage over Georgia and over the strategically important South Caucasus, especially while the United States was trying to expand its presence in the region. The Russian threat to halt all economic aid to Abkhazia (which depended largely on cash from Russia) slid into potential crisis when opposition leader Sergei Bagapsh won the Abkhaz presidential election of October 2004. Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Alexander Yakovenko, even indicated on 12 November 2004 that Russia could intervene in Abkhazia if the post-election violence in the region continued ((Mackedon, 2004; Fuller, 2004; Blakov, 2004).

The Abkhazian and South Ossetian problems seemed to be frozen until President Saakashvili launched a drive to re-establish Georgian territorial integrity in 2004. The re-establishment of Tbilisi's control over Adjara and the forcing of Aslan Abashidze, the authoritarian leader of the region, from power gave the Georgian President more hope and courage in dealing with the other two renegade regions.

However, developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia demonstrated once again that the Abkhazia and South Ossetia cases were quite different from the Adjaran case. Overall, the most difficult issue that the Saakashvili Administration (which came to power after the 2003 Rose Revolution that forced Eduard Shevardnadze from the Georgian presidency in November 2003) had to deal with was Georgia's territorial integrity.

Saakashvili appeared determined to restore Tbilisi's control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The government's attempts in the summer of 2004 to apply the Adjaran solution in South Ossetia failed and even brought the two sides to the edge of armed confrontation, also creating tension between Georgia and Russia. Thus, analysts argued that unless the USA got more involved in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflicts, they were unlikely to be solved in a short term period. In this matter, the West gave strong support to Georgia during and after the Rose Revolution, but it was still not very clear whether the West was ready to risk confrontation with Russia, which sought to preserve the status quo and kept the Georgian conflicts 'frozen' (Devdariani, 2004, September 21; Miller, 2004).

1.3. The War in Chechnya and the Pankisi Gorge

Up until this date, the Chechen conflict has long been a powerful irritant in Georgia-Russia relations. Russia has continuously accused the Georgian leadership of letting military supplies to Chechnya pass through Georgia. Furthermore, Russia claims that Tbilisi turns a blind eye to Chechen fighters setting up bases in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that the spread of international terrorism into Georgia may pose a threat to the security of Russia's southern borders. He argued that Russia had the right to widen its search for terrorists into Georgian territory. Thus Russia announced that it wanted to conduct a joint operation with Georgia against Chechen fighters in the Pankisi Gorge. Georgia continuously denied the Russian accusations and claimed that, in fact, the Russian military bases in the South Caucasus were the ones mostly involved in the transfer of weapons into Chechnya, not the Georgian ones. Georgia consistently turned down Russian requests to deploy Russian forces on the Georgian side of the border (Pravda, 2002; Khaburdzania, 2003; News From Russia, 2003).

At the beginning of the second military operation against Chechnya in 1999, Russia applied to the Georgian government for permission to use the Vaziani military airfield and other Russian bases in its operation against Chechnya. Georgia didn't accept this proposal and said that it favored the deployment of international observers from both the UN and OSCE along the approximately 80km Chechen part of the Georgian-Russian border.

In the summer of 2002, Russia once again threatened to send its troops into the Pankisi Valley against Chechen rebels, arguing that Georgia was unable to do so. One thousand Georgian troops were then deployed to the region in late August 2002, after a further escalation of ten-

sion between the two countries, when Georgia accused Russian jets of bombing the Pankisi valley.

In September 2002, Putin argued that, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter (related to the right to self-defense), Russia could attack Georgia if Georgia failed to secure its international border. Consequently, when the two sides called a truce in October 2002, Georgia decided to extradite and arrest some Chechen fighters to appease Russia. Another meeting took place between Shevardnadze and Putin in March 2003. After the Rose Revolution in November 2003, Georgia seemed to re-establish its control over the region, but the area remained a safe haven for terrorists (German, 2004).

This issue was one of the main points of discussion between Presidents Saakashvili and Putin during Saakashvili's visit to Russia in February 2004, after his election as President a month earlier. During the visit Saakashvili suggested to Putin that they join forces in enhancing security along the border and making it impenetrable to Chechen fighters. They agreed on the exchange of intelligence on terrorists. Although this was not Georgian's first offer to work together on this issue, it renewed hope of an improvement in relations.

The Georgian-Russian *rapprochement* created some anxiety among the Chechen refugees in the Pankisi Gorge, leaving them feeling increasingly insecure. Russia's talk of pre-emptive strikes against suspected terrorist bases in other countries in the post-Beslan era (the three-day hostage-taking at Beslan School in North Ossetia took place in early September 2004) once again scared Georgia. Tbilisi started looking for international allies who would support its position in the Pankisi Gorge. The Georgian authorities could not get clear support from the West, although major Western countries actively backed the Rose Revolution which catapulted Saakashvili into the presidential suite.

1.4. Russian Companies' Monopoly over the Georgian Energy Sector

The Russian companies' monopoly in Georgia's energy sector caused Georgia serious concern. The Georgian government suspected that Russia was using Georgia's energy dependence as a means of trying to force Georgia to pursue pro-Russian policies. Russia's cutting of natural gas supplies to Georgia on New Years Day 2001 was the best example of this. Russia argued that the periodic cuts were a response to Georgia's unpaid gas bills, though this may not have been true in all cases.

The appointment of Kakha Bendukidze – the former head of Russia's largest manufacturing company, United Heavy Machinery – as Georgia's Economic Minister in June 2004 must also be mentioned here. In his first declaration of his policy priorities, Bendukidze specified that opening up Georgia's economy to competition and investment was his number

one goal. This strategy helped Russian companies, especially in the energy and transport sectors, to get involved even more intensively in Georgia's economy. In the meantime, Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, in order to encourage Russian investors, declared in May 2004 that advisors from the Russian Ministry of Economic Development would help Georgia amend its tax code (Blagov, 2004, June 3).

In August 2003, RAO Unified Energy Systems, the Russian electricity monopoly, purchased a 75% stake in AES-Telasi, a joint venture which belongs to Georgia, from AES Silk Road. Aeroflot also held talks about buying the Georgian national airline, Airzena. During his meeting in July 2003 with then Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, the former U.S. Secretary of State, James Baker, expressed his country's dissatisfaction at the presence in Georgia of Russian energy companies like Gazprom and UES (Pravda, 2003, January 25; Pravda, 2003, August 19).

The implicit dangers of Georgia's electric system dependence became obvious again on August 18, 2003, when disruption to a transmission line switched off the entire country. Government officials claimed sabotage. But opposition politicians accused President Eduard Shevardnadze of betraying his citizens by allowing Russian energy companies decisive influence over Georgia's electricity supply. Russia's electricity monopoly took a controlling interest in Georgia's power plants on August 6, 2003 of the same year, a few weeks after a Moscow-based natural gas giant won the right to upgrade and manage pipelines through Georgia (Baran, 2003).

However, there had been some attempts to re-balance this situation in Georgia. In September 2004, a proposal to restrict the selling of more than 25% of the total shares of any Georgian state-run facility to foreign state-owned companies was approved by the Parliamentary Committee on Economic Sectors (Khutsidze, 2004). The basic aim of the proposal was to restrict the participation of particular companies (like Russian state-run energy giants Gazprom and Unified Energy Systems) in the privatization process that had just gotten underway, so as to prevent Georgia suffering continued direct energy dependence on Russia. However, there were also serious concerns that this attempt would hinder the Economy Ministry's broader privatization program.

The issue of Georgia's dependence on Russia continued to be viewed differently by various experts in both Georgia and Russia. Some Georgian experts thought that the main motivation for Russia's involvement in Georgia was political rather than economic, intended to balance U.S. influence in the country. On the other hand, some Russian experts argued that this was an inevitable price Tbilisi had to pay to gain Russian support in its efforts to protect Georgia's territorial integrity.

1.5. The Export of Caspian Oil and Gas

Another area of concern between Georgia and Russia was Georgia's deviation from the Russian position with respect to the export of Caspian oil and gas. Georgia was already a participant in the U.S.-backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project, which aimed to reduce Russian influence in the region by diverting oil and, later, gas, around it. Georgia was important because without its involvement (given that it is strategically located on the East-West energy corridor and has common borders with Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia) none of the Western oil or gas pipeline projects could be realized (Aras, 2002, p. 14, 33, 34, 48; Cohen, 2003, January 9; Cohen, 2004, January 23).

However, an interesting development took place during President Saakashvili's visit to Russia on February 10-12, 2004. He declared that if Russia wants to build an oil pipeline through Georgia (passing from Novorossiysk, along the Black Sea Coast to Georgia via Abkhazia), Georgia would be ready to support it (Welt, 2004). This proposal was important for various reasons. First, the pipeline would have had to pass through the problematic area of Abkhazia and there would thus be a need for a pact to determine the area's status. Second, it would have been a parallel line to Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, which would have likely pleased Russia as well. The response to the proposal from the Russian side remained vague. It seemed Russia was not then directly opposing the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline as it was initially. Russia's ultimate reaction and the sincerity of the Georgian proposal were never tested as the relations between the two countries soured quickly in the following months of 2004.

II. Russia's General Approach towards the Former Soviet Republics

An analysis of the main reasons and parameters of the tension in Georgian-Russian relations during Putin's first mandate (2000-2004) would not be complete without an understanding of the deep, underlying motives for Russia's behavior. The main motivation behind Russia's behavior towards the states which have emerged on the geopolitical territory of the ex-Soviet Union was the centuries-old imperial mentality of Russians, particularly that of their political and military elite, who tended to pursue their country's national interests at the expense of those of other states (Brannon, 2009, p. 67-72).

Not only did negative psychological emotions determine Russian behavior, but strategic geopolitical considerations as well. These considerations were linked to the desire to renew the old Empire's military and industrial complex, the preservation of traditional demographic resources in the national groups of the Empire for the formation of the armed forces and the conservation of strategically important territories

for the maintenance of Russia's great power status . It is important to keep in mind that, in those years of political and economic renaissance – thanks to the growing price of energy resources – the restoration of the Russian empire was a national ambition (Cheterian, 2009, p. 162-75)

An armed conflict between Georgia and Russia, the possibility of which was not ruled out during those years due to the strengthening of imperialistic tendencies in Russian foreign and military policies, would have had very negative consequences not possible to predict then. Since its independence, Georgia's foreign policy has been largely shaped by Russian interests in the region and its role as a mediator in ethnic disputes within the country. Russia's designation of the Trans-Caucasus as a 'zone of vital influence' explained its decision to intervene in Georgia's internal affairs (Cornell, 2000, p. 120-134).

On the other hand, the presence of ethno-political conflicts, political instability and underdeveloped political institutions, weak economic structures and economic dependence on Russia left Georgia – even after the election of Saakashvili as President – still very vulnerable to Russian pressure and manipulation.

Conclusion

Georgia's Rose Revolution forced Russia to re-examine its foreign policy towards its so called "Near Abroad." Concerning Georgia, two main viewpoints prevailed in Russia: one held that Russia did not stand to benefit from geopolitical competition with the U.S. in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, and thus had to be more accommodating of its "Near Abroad" countries, using its influence – "soft powers" – to promote *rapprochement* between Tbilisi, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The second viewpoint was that President Saakashvili was an opponent of Russia and thus Russia should do nothing to stabilize his administration. Immediately after Saakashvili's election as Georgian president on January 25, 2004, Russia's stance on Georgia become much more assertive and the Kremlin at times resorted to outright provocations against Tbilisi, always haunted by the specter of losing its former empire. The Putin Administration lost no time to specify its intention to extend its power over the former Soviet area, sending the signal that it continues to test the geopolitical loyalty of Georgia.

In that context, it was also important for Georgia to get clear signals from the U.S., that it remained committed to the region's independent economic and political development and would not let Russia manipulate former Soviet republics as it wished.

Furthermore, the new developments in Georgia forced the Saakashvili Administration to re-examine Georgia's relations with Russia by taking into consideration various factors which had previously shaped

relations between the two countries. In the new situation, whilst indulging in brinkmanship, President Saakashvili seemed to favor improved Russian-Georgian relations. At that time some crucial questions arose: how willing would Saakashvili be to rely on the West to help resolve Georgia's problems with Russia; would he be able to balance relations with the West and Russia; how much would the West be willing to support Georgia at the expense of its relations with Russia?

If we take into consideration the developments between the West, Georgia and Russia after the Beslan School tragedy, it seems that the West did not want to throw its political – and much less, military – weight behind Tbilisi's efforts to reach its strategic objectives. Thus, what became decisive in terms of Georgia-Russia relations were mainly the political initiatives of the administrations of both countries and developments in both countries' relations with the regional states like Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Iran and the new regional actor, the United States.

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