
The View from Tbilisi. Georgian-Russian Relations at an All-time Low.

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TBILISI, Georgia. Since Mikheil Saakashvili and his Rose revolutionaries came to power in 2003, relations between Georgia and Russia have plummeted from strained cooperation to mutual distrust and even hatred; bilateral communication between the two countries is almost impossible without accusations and insults flying. On taking the helm, Saakashvili's government made two key promises, both of which Moscow found extremely distasteful: Georgian control would be restored in the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both currently under Russian influence, and Georgia would be repositioned internationally, pulling the South Caucasus country firmly away from Moscow's sphere of influence and integrating it as quickly as possible into the "Euro-Atlantic community." While the first of these promises has not yet been fulfilled, the second task is well underway.

The first clue to the change of geopolitical orientation in Georgia comes immediately upon landing at the Tbilisi airport, where Westerners breeze through passport control with a cursory passport check, while Russians have their visas studied laboriously. The main route from the airport is the recently renamed George W. Bush Street, leading to Freedom Square (formerly Lenin Square) in the heart of the city. Just off the square stands the newly opened Museum of the Soviet Occupation, a set of exhibits detailing the "repression of the Georgian people" between 1921 and 1991. The symbolism and timing of the museum's opening irked Russian President Vladimir Putin so much that he complained at length to Saakashvili at their bilateral meeting in St. Petersburg in June, pointing out that many of the top figures in the so-called occupation, such as Joseph Stalin and Lavrenty Beria, were in fact ethnic Georgians. According to a source in the Georgian government, Saakashvili's response was reportedly to suggest offering funds for Putin to open a Museum of the Georgian Occupation in Moscow.

The tough words between the two countries at the highest levels have not been restricted to private meetings, however. The spats have a childish feel to them, with both sides crying that the other started the hostile moves. Russia bans imports of Georgian wine in a move that seems overtly political; a Georgian minister responds that the Russian market is so low-grade that "even feces can be sold." Putin calls for referenda in the conflict zones of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; Georgians accuse Russia of military provocations on Georgian territory. The list goes on and on. One of the bitterest clashes came in the heart of winter, when pipeline explosions in the North Caucasus caused a disruption in gas supplies from Russia to Georgia for several days in January. When Saakashvili accused Russia of "sabotage," the Russian Foreign Ministry responded that the Georgians were suffering from "hysteria and bacchanalia." Shota Utiashvili, head of the Information and Analysis Department at the Interior Ministry, explained the Georgian suspicions. "Three pipelines exploded at the same time. Our prime minister repeatedly tried to call the Russian prime minister, but first they said he was busy, then he was ill. We offered to send our experts to look at the pipes, but the Russians refused. Our people were freezing, so we started importing gas from Azerbaijan. The Russians then decreased the flow to Azerbaijan." After this, asked Utiashvili, what conclusions could the Georgian side draw? "What do they say in Russia when these crises

occur? People say they blame Georgia, but I just can't understand how," he said with seemingly genuine bewilderment.

"Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgia-Russia relations have probably been the most difficult set of relations in the whole post-Soviet space," said Oksana Antonenko, senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. "There was always a perception in the Georgian elite that Russia is the main enemy, and with the arrival of Saakashvili, these kinds of sentiments have become mainstream."

The overwhelming view in Georgian political circles is that the problem for Russia is simply Georgia's aspirations to Western-style democracy and prosperity. Temuri Yakobashvili, executive vice president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, a Tbilisi-based think tank, presented the choice facing the Georgian leadership as simple. "We see countries that were in as difficult a position as Georgia at the fall of the Soviet Union, but are now integrating into Euro-Atlantic structures. The EU and NATO have transformed these Central and Eastern European states into viable democracies," he said. "It's obvious that Euro-Atlantic integration is the solution," said the analyst. Antonenko, on the other hand, believes that the equation might not be so simple for the Georgians. "I'm not sure that Georgia benefits at all from turning away from Russia," she said. "It's naive to think that the West will risk its relationship with Russia over Georgia, and Georgia suffers much more than Russia does from the worsening in relations."

Nevertheless, all over the country, the rhetorical shift from a post-Soviet to a pre-EU society is startling. At official government buildings, on billboards, even in giant horticultural arrangements, the four crosses of the Georgian flag appear alongside the yellow stars of the European Union's. Flying the flags ahead of actual membership of the institutions seems aimed at convincing both Georgians and foreigners that the trajectory chosen by the Saakashvili government is irreversible. Unlike in other CIS countries, the second language in official circles has become English, and most ministers and top government officials speak the language fluently.

The corridors of the Defense Ministry are lined with photographs of Georgian troops in both peacekeeping and combat action. Georgia, as a more-willing-than-most member of the "Coalition of the Willing," has around 900 troops in Iraq, the highest per-capita number of any country. Georgian troops are also in Afghanistan and Kosovo. In his office, Deputy Defense Minister Mamuka Kudava sits in front of two large flags - Georgian and NATO. "Before the Rose Revolution, there was basically no army and no combat capability," says Kudava. "Now our troops are well trained and equipped to NATO standards. Before, nobody wanted their children to join the army. Now, salaries have increased by between six and 15 times, and it's a prestigious job.

There is good morale and a sense of patriotism in the army."

Yakobashvili believes that the choice to look west is logical.

"There's nothing that Russia can offer us from a security point of view," he says. "What kind of security cooperation might Russia offer? They would train our officers, but do we really want this training? The Russian army is riddled with 'dedovshchina,' [hazing] there is inappropriate use of funds, loss of equipment and so on.

It's not an army that you'd wish to copy."

"A good way to look at how well Georgia is progressing with European integration is to look at the statements coming out of the Russian Foreign Ministry," said the Interior Ministry's Utiashvili. "If they are absolutely livid, it means we are doing well, but if they go quiet for a while, we realize we must be doing something wrong."

Utiashvili had just returned from Rome, where a Georgian delegation was making connections with the new government of Romano Prodi. In contrast to these closely forged links with EU countries and the United States, Utiashvili said there was very little routine interaction between Georgian and Russian ministries. "We have perfectly good relations and frequent contacts with the governments in Armenia and Azerbaijan. They have different political systems, but it's none of our business, we can still deal with them. The problem with Russia is that they always want to interfere with our affairs." Antonenko, however, feels that there might be more the Georgian side could do to engage Russia. "It's very strange that the Georgians have failed completely to identify any positive agenda with Russia - they are the only country in the CIS that has failed to do so," she said.

"Russian-Azeri relations were also strained, and there was also the issue of meddling in internal affairs over Karabakh. But now Azerbaijan has managed on the one hand to have friendly relations with the United States, including discussing U.S. military bases on Azeri territory, and on the other to retain good relations with Russia." She also pointed to the situation in Ukraine, where both sides have made moderately successful attempts to mend relations in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution.

Not everyone in Georgia is happy with the course that the Rose Revolution has taken since the triumphant parliament takeover in November 2003, when almost every pro-democracy politician in the country jumped on the Saakashvili bandwagon to rid the country of the government of Eduard Shevardnadze. Though individual opposition parties remain marginal, the chorus of discontented voices is growing. The most frequent accusations are that Saakashvili wheels out the "freedom and democracy" rhetoric for Western leaders, but the reality for ordinary Georgians is somewhat different. "Personal freedoms are still sacrificed to achieve bigger societal objectives," said David Usupashvili, chairman of the Republican Party, a moderate opposition force. "There's no room for the rule of law, human rights or other basic principles of democracy," he continued. A particular sticking point is a high-profile murder case in which high-level Interior Ministry officials are implicated in a cover-up.

When it comes to relations with Russia, Usupashvili feels that Saakashvili's "childish rhetoric" has inflamed the situation: "We need to engage with Russia, and to behave as a mature government that is willing to guarantee its own security, but also doesn't pose a threat to anyone." However, even the opposition leaders feel that Moscow's intentions are hostile. "It's more than clear that the current Russian government and leadership do not want a civilized and normal relationship with Georgia, nor do they want to recognize its territorial integrity," said Usupashvili. "There would be no talk of NATO if it weren't for the security threat coming from Russia. We saw in the 1990s what it means to be alone facing Russia with its unclear, unbalanced policies in the Caucasus region."

A particular thorn in the side of bilateral relations are the "frozen conflicts" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Georgia has recently been doing its best to thaw out. Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili recently promised that if he does not celebrate the coming new year in the South Ossetian capital, he will resign. In Tbilisi, the conflicts

are seen not as independence struggles but as proxy conflicts fought by Russia to retain influence in the South Caucasus.

"There are two sides in these conflicts," said Kudava. "But it's not like Russia would like us to believe. This is not between Georgians and Ossetians, or between Georgians and Abkhaz. These are conflicts between Russia and Georgia."

Georgians at all levels are adamant that the impetus for improved relations with Russia has to come from Russia itself. "Russia should understand that it is in its best interests to have a stable, prosperous, integrated and unified Georgia," said Kudava. "We need Russia to be more flexible and constructive, and have stability on the southern slopes of the Caucasus." Even those ordinary Georgians who fondly eulogize that the standard of living was better in the Soviet Union seem to have no warm feelings for the current Russian leadership. Criticism and non-comprehension of the Putin government is almost universal. But ultimately, it is Georgia that will lose out the most from the current state of affairs. "Georgia, after all, is not an island in the Indian Ocean," said Antonenko. "It's on the border with Russia and it cannot afford to have such poor relations with its northern neighbor."
