



## ***Georgia and Russia: Smoldering Conflict at a Geopolitical Intersection***

**Georgia can be a strategic pillar of stability in an otherwise volatile region and we should consequently place it much higher on our political agenda. Georgians want nothing more than NATO membership and the West cannot deny the evident successes of democratization and economic reform. The internal logic of realist politics however demands other factors also be considered. Georgia joining NATO would further exacerbate the conflict with Russia.**

It is the fate of Georgia, like that of Ukraine, the Baltic States or Armenia, to lie on the fringe of the Russian sphere of influence. The government in Moscow shows no interest in a stable development of these countries. The contrast to the failure and backwardness of the Russian societal model would be too painful to see. Meanwhile, Georgia is an example of how a country can position itself in a successful, modern and forward-looking way despite these adversities.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia was struggling with massive problems. Corruption and nepotism dominated the political system. In recent years, many of these problems could successfully be combated through far-reaching reforms. This is how Georgia has become an increasingly attractive investment location. Meanwhile, the country came closer to the European Union and joined its "Eastern Partnership". Georgia's stated goal is to become a member of the EU.

Similar aspects apply to the possibility of NATO membership. Georgians want nothing more than NATO membership to help decide the conflict with Russia – so the perception – in their favor. The Alliance also has a fundamental interest in Georgia's membership as it needs allies in a geo-strategically important region. But the fact is that in the case of Georgian membership, NATO would get a land border with the Russian heartland. This prospect is an eyesore to the Russians. Georgia joining would therefore only further exacerbate the conflict with Russia for the foreseeable future.

As membership is unrealistic at this stage, both sides restrict themselves to approach each other with small steps. This is a prudent course of action. Just how credible would the obligation to collective self-defense be if Georgia joined with thousands of Russian soldiers already occupying then-NATO territory? This is precisely Moscow's calculus: NATO would not take in any state that continues to deal with an active conflict on its borders.

The conflict of the Georgians with the Great Power in its north has long been simmering. The former Georgian Foreign Minister Maya Panjikidze once said: "We have never ceased to fear the Russians." Russia time and again tries to keep the small Caucasian country under its influence, as the Kremlin still counts Georgia as part of its "backyard". In the summer of 2008, Russia supported provocations by separatists in South Ossetia. President Saakashvili ordered tanks into the area, which had hitherto been jointly controlled by Russian and South Ossetian security forces. This Georgian effort to gain control over its own territory was repelled by Russian forces in a brute show of force.

Since the military conflict of 2008, Russia de facto occupies twenty percent of Georgian territory and has not only unilaterally recognized the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, but has also installed puppet regimes there. The Kremlin does not adhere to the peace plan mediated by the European Council to de-escalate the confrontation and many Georgians were expelled from South Ossetia. An end to the conflict is not in sight.

Russia repeatedly provokes Tbilisi: Insidiously and under the cover of the night, Russia shifts border fences, violates Georgian airspace and performs military exercises near the border. Russian soldiers in South Ossetia are 40 kilometers from Tbilisi.

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This is how the Kremlin ensures that the situation in South Ossetia does not relax and that NATO membership of Georgia remains a distant prospect.

It thus is no surprise that Georgians have a heightened urge for security. And although as a people, Georgians have quite a relaxed relationship with Russians, they are confronted with an ever nationalistic and expansive Russian foreign policy. More than ever, this is forcing Georgia to declare sides, following Russia's unilateral annexation of Crimea.

Georgia's fate ultimately is also decided by developments in Russia. If the flames of national rhetoric were continued to be fed and the Kremlin further tries to divide the West, a long-term dialogue and understanding between the West and Russia lies beyond our immediate grip.

The West and Georgia's government stand before a dilemma. They cannot deny the evident successes of democratization and the obvious opening of the country to the West. After all, over 80% of Georgians want their country to join both the EU and NATO. The internal logic of realist politics however demands other factors also be considered. In the face of an increasingly unpredictable Russian foreign policy, would it not be unwise to irate the Russians? They would surely view any expansion of NATO or the EU as a hostile move, even if only for tactical reasons. This assessment says a lot about the Russian understanding of democracy, given that Georgia only wants to exercise its sovereignty and right to self-determination.

In 2005, Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union "a major geopolitical disaster" of the 20th century. He is clearly working towards a roll-back. Here, the EU's current tendencies of disintegration and American isolationism are playing into his hands. By inserting targeted divisions at various levels, he is trying to speed up these processes. In the European Union, this approach was met with mixed responses: Representatives from Baltic States called for a stronger military presence. Meanwhile, the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier became dangerously apologetic when he described a recent NATO-exercise in the Baltics as "war cries" and "saber-rattling". By all accounts, a strategy of détente or appeasement would not be understood by Russia.

Russia's understanding of the international system can be described as a zero-sum game. The Kremlin is immaculately pursuing a realist foreign policy and is using every chance to fight for what it sees as Russia's interests. Russians cannot imagine that collaboration or integration could possibly improve their standard of living, let alone their standing in the world. To them, institutions and supranational structures are not of primary concern. What matters above all is having the power to push their national interests. Only because in the West, we have by and large rejected this thinking following the Second World War, we must not forget that Russia is still very much at home in this 20th century logic.

Russia's understanding of how the world works, or rather ought to work, has far-reaching consequences for Georgia. While big strides have been made in recent years, the country still faces an uphill battle. It is truly regrettable that the ghosts of the Cold War are coming back to haunt us in this way, but nonetheless it is also in our own interest to support Georgia on this arduous journey. After all, the West critically needs a reliable ally at this seam with Russia.

Of course we must do everything to maintain the lines of communication we have. At the same time, we should also be unwavering in our actions and learn from Georgia's experiences with Russia. Georgia can be a strategic pillar of stability in an otherwise volatile region and we should consequently place it much higher on our political agenda.

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