

Georgia and Russia: From Uneasy Rapprochement to Divorce?

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When Bidzina Ivanishvili became Georgia's prime minister following the victory of his Georgian Dream (GD) coalition in October 2012 parliamentary elections, he promised to dramatically improve Georgian-Russian relations. The announcement of this "reset" by the new Georgian government must have delighted the Kremlin. The new foreign policy approach also ignited a robust debate among Georgia pundits about how the new political situation in Georgia can affect Russian-Georgian relations, which had hit rock bottom due to the 2008 war.

Even as the new government is ready to establish a dialogue with Russia in order to discuss problems that persist in bilateral relations and improve relations with Moscow, Tbilisi has drawn certain red lines. As the new Georgian leadership seeks to engage Russia through reinvigorating trade, cultural, and humanitarian ties, distinct challenges in diplomatic relations will remain as long as Russia occupies internationally-recognized Georgian territory. Tbilisi also has another nonnegotiable red line: the freedom to choose its own alliances. Meanwhile, Moscow has drawn a red line of its own: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has confirmed several times that Russia does not intend to revoke its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The new Russian-Georgian dialogue will tone down the heated rhetoric in bilateral relations, but it is unlikely to produce a wholesale change in the posturing of Tbilisi and Moscow.

First Modest Attempts to Improve Relations

Georgia's 2012 parliamentary elections created a new domestic political environment that potentially has implications for the wider region. Tbilisi is trying to test whether or not Russia has changed its approach toward Georgia given this new political reality. While some skeptics in Georgia assert that Tbilisi has no concrete roadmap in its dealings with Russia, Ivanishvili's government claims it has a vision of how to improve relations with Moscow while not sacrificing vital Georgian interests. It is in this context

that observers should understand Tbilisi's decision to not boycott the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. The cessation of activity by Georgia's Russian-language PIK television channel, which was financed from the state budget, also fits this trend, as well as more muted discussion on the topic of the 19th-century Circassian genocide. Finally, the Georgian government has appointed a Special Representative for Relations with Russia, in so doing further displaying its readiness for dialogue.

On the breakaway regions, Tbilisi is open to some flexibility short of status discussions. The government has voiced a new strategy toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia, entailing the establishment of direct dialogue and an overall softening of tone based on goodwill. The government hopes this will change the mood among the population in the separatist regions and encourage more positive sentiments about the role of the Georgian government.

One particularly striking signal concerns the operation of the Abkhazia section of the Georgian railroad. Tbilisi has traditionally opposed the reopening of this railroad. Unblocking the railroad would provide transit benefits to Abkhazia and allow a low-cost alternative ground link for Russia to connect to its military ally, Armenia, home of Russia's 102nd military base. If the rail plan is ever implemented, it will also ease conditions for semi-blockaded Armenia. For Georgia, it could provide a direct trade route to Russia once stable economic relations are established.

Surprisingly, opposition to Tbilisi's conciliatory proposal is not entirely domestic. While the opposition United National Movement lambasts the proposal as "anti-state" and in Russia's interest, a November 2012 public opinion survey commissioned by the U.S. National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Georgia revealed that 68 percent of respondents approved of the reestablishment of the railway link, while only 24 percent were neutral and 6 percent disapproved.¹ Meanwhile, both Moscow and authorities in Sukhumi are not keen to consider Tbilisi's conciliatory proposal, viewing it as a thinly veiled attempt to force the breakaway region back under Tbilisi's rule. The recent installation of barbed wire by Russian forces along the administrative boundary line with South Ossetia demonstrates that the Kremlin is testing the limits of Georgia's commitment to mending its relationship with Russia.

In a signal that some substantial improvements are underway, Moscow recently announced that it was lifting the 2006 ban on Georgian mineral water, wine, and other products to the Russian market, putting an end to the "health concerns" that Russian officials originally cited as justification for the ban. While Georgia has a lot to gain economically by resuming exports to Russia, not all its wine companies are in a rush to enter the Russian market. Winemakers do not believe that Georgian wine will attain the level it achieved before the Russian embargo in 2006, since at this stage Georgian wine is considered a luxury good rather than a most demanded product. In recent years, Georgian wine exporters diversified their portfolios by reaching out to new destinations in European and Asian markets. They even managed to reach pre-embargo figures in

¹ Luis Navarro, Ian T. Woodward, and NDI Georgia, "Public attitudes in Georgia: Results of a November 2012 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC," National Democratic Institute, November 2012, www.civil.ge/files/files/2012/NDI-PoliticalRating-Nov2012.pdf.

terms of the value of exported wine. Some companies operating in Western markets fear that a drastic change in export destination could have negative effects, such as a decrease in quality or further shocks from the politically-dependent and unreliable Russian market. Georgian winemakers see Russia's state consumer protection agency "Rospotrebnadzor" as a political arm of Russian foreign policy that regularly blocks imports of foodstuffs ranging from American meat to Ukrainian cheese. As for Russian business interests in Georgia, Russian foreign investment has flowed into the country even when the political relationship between the two countries was at its lowest level.

Georgia's Western Course Reaffirmed in Bipartisan Consensus

Despite signs of rapprochement between Moscow and Tbilisi in economic, cultural, and humanitarian affairs, Moscow does not appear to have any desire to improve relations in other key areas—such as the abolition of strict visa requirements or the return of Georgian internally displaced persons to the occupied breakaway regions—unless Georgia turns away from the West and toward Russian-led integration projects. According to Russia's new Foreign Policy Concept, the Eurasian Union defines the future of the post-Soviet space. Two components of the "Eurasianist" ideology that helps to underpin the project are Eastern Orthodoxy and the so-called "common historical heritage" of the region. While the Western world is against the use of such a term, it is a wording the Russian leadership are still clearly clinging to in relation to Georgia. In a June 2013 interview to Russia's state-owned English-language television channel Russia Today (RT), President Vladimir Putin already hinted that in order to reestablish relations, Georgia should restore close security ties with the Kremlin.

While Moscow awaits a shift in Georgia's foreign policy, Tbilisi insists this is not in the cards. The change of power in Georgia has not diminished popular support for Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO.² Georgians still seek to enhance their security by incorporating their state into European structures and alliances. Despite a recent spate of insurgent attacks on its forces in Afghanistan, Georgia continues to be the largest non-NATO contributor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and clearly hopes this kind of participation will sell the West on its longstanding desire to join the NATO alliance.

In March, the Georgian parliament unanimously adopted a 14-point "Resolution on Basic Directions of Georgia's Foreign Policy," drafted jointly by rival GD and United National Movement (UNM) factions, which confirms Georgia's desire to join NATO and the EU.³ This consensus was a result of long discussion, parliamentary debate, and mutual insults and accusations, but the disputes were about tactics. The final decision confirmed that there exist few strategic disagreements between the GD and the UNM.

² "Georgian National Study," International Republican Institute, Baltic Surveys Ltd./The Gallup organization, The Institute of Polling And Marketing, November 9 - 21, 2012, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2013_February_8_Survey_of_Georgian_Public_Opinion_November_9_21_2012.pdf.

³ "Resolution on Basic Directions of Georgia's Foreign Policy," Parliament of Georgia, March 21, 2013, http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3136%3Aresolution&catid=54%3Astatements-appeals-and-resolutions&Itemid=88&lang=en.

Both sides agree on non-recognition of the Russian-sponsored “independence” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and they also agreed to indefinitely postpone resumption of diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation (the resolution states that “Georgia cannot have diplomatic relations with countries, which recognize the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia”). The resolution also excludes Georgia from joining “military-political or customs unions” with such countries, which in simple terms means that Georgia will not join Moscow-dominated groupings like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), or the Customs Union. The adoption of this uncompromising 14-point resolution limits the likelihood of a dramatic turnaround in relations between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Conclusion

Having created expectations of improved ties with Russia, Georgia’s new government faces the stark reality that little tangible change can be expected in the near future. Finding a middle path between confrontation and capitulation will be one of the toughest tasks for Ivanishvili’s government. Even though the new thaw between Georgia and Russia has triggered hopes that their troubled relations might be headed for substantial recovery, the dialogue that Tbilisi and Moscow have launched should not create an illusion that they will reach an across-the-board agreement anytime soon. Just like the Georgian government will not alter its pro-Western orientation or drive to join NATO and the EU, Russia should not be expected to change its core policy toward Georgia or fully respect its sovereignty. Consequently, it is too early to say whether Georgian-Russian ties will advance to a new qualitative level.

The most Ivanishvili’s government can do is to follow the model of current Russian-Japanese relations: economic and cultural links in the absence of a full restoration of diplomatic relations. As the national interests of the two states do not really match, this potentially is the last government in Georgia well positioned to find a modus vivendi with Moscow in finalizing their “civilized divorce,” a route previously trod by some left-leaning governments in the Baltics. Should this process commence, Georgia will need to focus its efforts and appeal for Western help more than ever in order to achieve a long-term, peaceful transformation of the ongoing conflicts in Georgia.

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