RUSSIA’S WORLDVIEW AND ITS RELATIONS WITH GEORGIA: GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND DOMESTIC LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

*View from Russia*
INTRODUCTION

Summing up relations evolving over a certain period of time requires the identification of phases and key trends in these very relations. There are a number of approaches to the periodisation of Russian-Georgian relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Interestingly, literature in Russian provides mostly approaches describing bilateral relations from the perspective of Georgia’s internal processes:

1) The attempt to restore Georgian independence through negotiations with the Soviet authorities (from the end of the 1980s through to 1991).
5) The Rose Revolution and an attempt to integrate with the West (2003–2008).

Yet another approach to the periodisation puts a greater emphasis on Russian politics:

1) State-building amidst harsh competition between elites (from the end of the 1980s to 1992).
2) Establishing links between Georgia and NATO and drastic changes in Russian policies with respect to the maintenance of territorial integrity of post-soviet states, as well as the encouragement of Georgia’s accession to the CIS (1994–2003).
3) Harnessing Georgia’s statehood and a new stage of strengthening Russia’s position at an international level (2003–2008).

Russian scholarly literature offers two bulks of work. The first one represents an attempt to rethink Russian policies towards the rest of the post-Soviet space or its individual sub-regions (the South Caucasus, Central Asia, the European part of the CIS). The second one focuses mostly on the periodisation of bilateral relations with post-Soviet countries according to changes of elites or foreign policy by Russia’s partner-states. In this respect, the present paper looks at 25 years of Russian-Georgian relations based on periodisation, which primarily takes into account the development of the Russian Federation’s foreign policy strategy. The above-mentioned periodisation of Russian foreign policy consists of the following phases:

2) State and nation-building according to both Russia’s national priorities and the rules of the Western world order (although Russia believed that these rules were often ignored by Western countries themselves) - from 1996 to 2007.
3) The construction of ‘sovereign democracy’ and Russia acting according to its own interpretation of the Western rules of the world order (from 2007 to present).

In order to understand Russia’s relations towards Georgia, one has to fathom the logic of Russia’s actions when pursuing its foreign policy. Its pattern of behaviour has depended on the development of the country as an independent state in the aftermath of 1991. At the same time, it is expedient that the logic of international behaviour be examined at several different levels of analysis: Firstly, personal interaction between heads of states; and secondly, the influence of the domestic situation on the formation of foreign policy; and thirdly, the impact of international trends on regional and global foreign policies. It is important to understand that Russia’s policy at the regional level of the post-Soviet space is closely tied to its self-positioning at the global level and its relations with great powers and regional organisations such as NATO and the EU. In some cases, Russia’s regional policies depend on domestic processes as well.

Western observers can be split into two camps. There are those that deem Russian foreign policy difficult to predict (as in the cases of the conflict with Georgia in 2008 and the reunification with Crimea in 2014, both of which came as a surprise to many in the West). On the other hand, there are those who consider it predictable, provided that the Kremlin’s regional policy is perceived as neo-imperial or predatory. In order to understand the key tenets of Russian foreign policy and its evolution, one has to look at official documents (foreign policy concepts, annual reviews of international and diplomatic activities, publications of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) since 2007), articles written by ministers of foreign affairs and speeches made by Russian presidents. The goal for both the Georgian and Russian parts of the research is to trace changes in official discourses, linking these shifts with the stages observed in the development of each of the countries.

2 This article, as well as the following one of Z. Bezhanishvili, was published in 2008 and therefore the periodization covers the timeframe up to 2008.

THE FORMATION OF RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS GEORGIA AT A DOMESTIC LEVEL

THE ISSUE OF THE COHERENCE OF OFFICIAL DISCOURSE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 1990S

At this time, the formation of Russia’s foreign policy was primarily shaped by internal political and economic development of the country.

In the 1990s, the Russian Parliament began to engage actively in foreign policy. This was particularly the case with the State Duma, which started to use foreign policy topics in order to highlight disagreement with President Yeltsin, or to gain points in the domestic political struggle. Relations with Georgia were among those themes that caught the attention of Parliament members, with a Russian-Georgian agreement being signed in 1994 but never ratified.

In the period until the end of 1993, Russian foreign policy could be called anything but coordinated. The closing sentence of 1993 Foreign Policy Concept reads as follows: ‘It would be in the best interests of the country to develop the widest possible consensus on foreign policy choices’. As D. Baluev argues, even foreign policy after 1993 cannot be characterised as realist, because according to theories of international relations ‘realism’ suggests that the state is a monolithic unitary actor. However, in Russia at that time there was not even a consensus on what constituted the national interest.

The first phase of Russia’s foreign policy can be titled as a period of ‘incomplete sovereignty’ and characterised by trends such as the continuation of the process of decentralisation, particularly with regards to Russia’s regions that were attempting to strengthen their influence of national politics. These regions were pursuing Yeltsin’s invitation to ‘take as much sovereignty as you can swallow’, while federal authorities were cementing this principle in paper. As such, the 1993 Foreign Policy Concept holds that ‘subjects of the Federation are authorised to act as independent players in foreign and international economic relations, unless their behaviour contradicts the Constitution and federal laws of the Russian Federation’. Russia’s foreign policy was based on the interests of the Federation as a whole as well of its individual regions. These ideas are highlighted in the preamble of the Concept. However, the later editions of the Concept had no mention whatsoever of Russia’s regions in their preambles.

In the section dealing with the global dimension of Russia’s foreign policy, it was noted that firstly it was in Russia’s best interest to have a favourable international environment in order to support the development of the country’s democratic institutions. The 1993 Concept enshrines the idea that the fate of Russia’s reforms and ‘a normal life of Russian citizens’ require the growth of economic relations, the resolution of conflicts and sustainability as preconditions for the implementation of Russia’s foreign policy in the ‘far abroad’. That is to say, that Russia’s development within the post-Soviet region and its relations with neighbouring countries create the conditions for the formation of Russia’s foreign policy towards the West.

A PHASE OF ‘INCOMPLETE SOVEREIGNTY’

It appears that the description of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space as neo-imperial is based on the idea that immediately after 1991 the former Soviet republics began to interact with one another like independent, sovereign states. Accordingly, any action, which according to observers was taken outside of the framework of idealised relations between sovereign states, was interpreted as interference. However, one needs to understand that for these states to have suddenly gained legal sovereignty did not mean that they had immediate, complete independence, as interactions took place between these countries in the midst of incomplete state-building processes. The American authors Alexander Cooley and Hendrick Spruyt developed the concept of incomplete sovereignty. In their book, the researchers argue that collapsing empires give birth to mixed forms of sovereignty due to the division of property, territories, borders, etc. according to the wishes of the separate parts of the former empire. The transitional period towards effective sovereignty implies the presence of interim agreements that are later revisited.

When it comes to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the transitional period may be marked from December 1991 to the second half of 1993 because of certain developments that unfolded within this period. For example, the collapse of the ruble zone in August 1993 and abandoning of an idea of of the Joint Military Forces in the framework the CIS in favour of national armies in December 1993.

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In terms of foreign policy, the first phase coincided with the appointment of Andrey Kozyrev as the Russian Federation’s first foreign minister and continued until 1996,1 when he was replaced by experienced politician Yevgeny Primakov, whose actions were considered to be more pragmatic and less conceding towards Western interests. Russian experts typically consider this first phase (1991-1996) to be characterised by the country’s weakened position in the international arena while Kozyrev, notorious for his concession vis-à-vis the West, was nicknamed ‘Mister Yes’.2

The Russian researcher A. Bogaturov characterizes this phase as a period of ‘democratic solidarity’, when the Russian leadership expected the West to demonstrate a sense of unity and care for the interests of Russia as a young democracy.3 There were hopes that such solidarity would nourish a favourable international environment for building democracy in Russia.4

The country’s third foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, later wrote that the goal to create a benevolent international environment for internal development was based on the assumption that in the presence of a great number of unresolved domestic problems, foreign policy should, first and foremost, serve the interests of internal development. Otherwise the inertia of the superpower mind-set would lead to the over-exploitation of domestic resources because of the desire to participate in all important international processes.5

In addition, by 1994 it was evident that the aspirations of the Russian elites to be accepted into a benevolent international environment and for Russia to be treated as an equal partner were far from realistic. Kozyrev himself was well aware of this situation. In his article published in 1994 titled Strategy for Partnership, he wrote that the only option for the Kremlin to pursue in its foreign policy towards the West, and for the West to develop relations with the Kremlin, was to recognize ‘the equality and mutual benefit of both parties, and the status and significance of Russia as a great power’. If the Russian democrats could not realise the country’s independence or build its confidence with the support of Western partners, these very Russian democratic elites would soon be ‘swep away by waves of aggressive nationalism feeding on demands of national and state self-affirmation’.6 Therefore, Kozyrev, who was considered to be an exclusively pro-Western politician, realised that Russia would seek ways to build its self-confidence; however, this quest could lead the country on either a constructive or a destructive path. According to Kozyrev, this venture could only be constructive if Western cooperation was based on certain conditions. He argued that ‘it would be ridiculous to expect to build an unequal partnership with Russia on the paternalistic principle that “if the Russians are good now, they must follow in our footsteps”; “partnership does not necessarily entail rejecting tough, even aggressive policies at times, when pursuing national interests”’.7

Kozyrev also wrote about Russia’s position with respect to conflicts in other post-Soviet countries. He believed that, broadly speaking, the ‘narrow nationalistic and ego-centric approach’ nurtured by ‘aggressive nationalism’ would eventually push the system of international relations back to 1914. Kozyrev argued that ‘democratic states must employ a firm moral stance and not support the opposition of some nations to others’.8

However, the minister of foreign affairs tried to justify Russia’s special role in resolving conflicts in the post-Soviet space. For instance, Kozyrev compared the peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia with the one undertaken by the U.S. in Somalia, where the US had to withdraw its forces: ‘A fundamental difference between Somalia and Abkhazia or Tajikistan is that we cannot “distance” ourselves from conflicts raging in the former USSR, the way Americans could in Somalia. I think that if the U.S. had had similar conflicts at its doorsteps and in the proximity to practically open borders, they would not have allowed themselves to withdraw.’9 Kozyrev also provided arguments for why the West should consider Russia to have a special role and responsibility with respect to the former USSR countries. If the West was not ready to pay for the oil and gas provided to the former republics or to pay off the latter’s debts, then the West had to recognize Russia’s role as it ‘serves as a stabilizing factor and a driver of economic reforms in the post-Soviet space’, even though it ‘cost us billions of dollars’. Kozyrev made parallels with the European Union, where the economic leadership of large member-states (such as France and Germany) has long been recognized. Therefore, in this case, why should Western partners not support Russia in its pursuit of the progressive reintegration of the post-Soviet space ‘on a voluntary and equal basis?’10

1 Held the office of the Foreign Minister from 1990 to 1996.
2 In comparison to the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, Andrei Gromiko, known in the West as ‘Minister No’ for his harsh negotiation style.
4 The same goal was laid out in the first foreign policy concept of Russia adopted in 1993.
7 Ibid, P. 185.
8 Ibid, P. 186.
9 Ibid, P. 190.
RUSSIA’S GEORGIAN POLICY: THE LEVEL OF PERSONAL INTERACTION

YELTSIN-GAMSAKHURDIA

Before the collapse of the USSR, Boris Yeltsin and Zviad Gamsakhurdia had established relations based, to some extent, on a shared desire to obtain independence from the central authorities. After Shevardnadze’s accession to the presidency of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia was generally referred to as a politician with radical nationalist views. However, it should be noted that, on the eve of the collapse of the USSR, nationalist sentiments and the desire to obtain independence were widely shared among the Soviet republics and dominated political processes at the level of the republics.

As Soso Tsiskarishvili recalls, in reality Yeltsin supported Gamsakhurdia after the events of 9 April 1989 in Tbilisi. Yeltsin visited Tbilisi in May 1989 and held a meeting with a Georgian commission investigating the April events. Yeltsin told members of the commission that ‘Abkhazia is Georgia! The Abkhaz and Georgians can resolve their own problems between themselves. This is not our question.’

The next important meeting between Yeltsin and Gamsakhurdia took place in Georgia on 23 March 1991 when Yeltsin arrived in the capacity of the Chair of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federal Republic following an invitation from Zviad Gamsakhurdia, then the speaker of the Georgian Parliament. It should be noted that Georgia abstained from the all-Soviet referendum on the preservation of the USSR held on 17 March 1991. Nevertheless, the referendum was conducted in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the self-declared Republic of South Ossetia where the local populations voted for the maintenance of the USSR. On 31 March 1991, Georgian authorities announced a referendum for the restoration of Georgian independence. As such, Yeltsin’s visit took place amidst developments that were important for Georgia’s independence. Furthermore, the official meeting resulted in the signing of a protocol that confirmed the intention of the parties to draft an agreement on intra-state relations between the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Republic of Georgia in April 1991.

Notably, in the protocol South Ossetia is referred to as the ‘former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast’, something both Yeltsin and Gamsakhurdia had compromised on. The leader of North Ossetia, Akhسارbek Galazov, who was present at the meeting, also agreed to compromise on the title. After Yeltsin’s visit, protesters in South Ossetia took to the streets with signs saying ‘Shame on Yeltsin for his conspiracy with Georgian Fascists’, condemning the meeting for going ahead without the participation of South Ossetian representatives.

However, it should be noted that Yeltsin’s visit to the Caucasus and his attempts to resolve the Ossetian-Ingush and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts were met with a considerable level of scepticism in Russia. The newspaper Kommersant wrote that Yeltsin acted like an amateur while his peacekeeping efforts were guided primarily by his desire to gain support from the autonomous republics, as less than half of the population residing in these regions had voted for the establishment of an office of the president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. In addition, Yeltsin was often blamed by his political opponents for ignoring the interests of minority groups.

According to experts, Yeltsin was trying to take the initiative to resolve the interethic conflicts before the Soviet centre in order to boost his political ratings. It should be mentioned that in his ‘Appeal to the people of Abkhazia’ of 15 March 1991 (before the all-Soviet referendum), Gamsakhurdia accused the Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba of supporting the ‘outdated Communist order’ while the ‘whole world condemns Gorbachov’s repressive policies against ‘enslaved peoples’. Thus, against the backdrop of Gorbachev’s ‘imperialistic policies’ (as they were referred to by Gamsakhurdia), Yeltsin appeared to stand a chance of becoming a truly democratic leader. Overall, Yeltsin’s policy towards issues of separatism during the collapse of the Soviet Union was largely shaped by the logic of stoking confrontation between the leaders of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the USSR. Later on, this logic idea was further supported by additional factors such as growing separatism within Russia.

To highlight Yeltsin’s good relations with Zviad Gamsakhurdia, it should be noted that the latter was appointed as the toastmaster at an inaugural banquet dedicated to Yeltsin’s presidency.

At the same time, however, Yevardnadze came to power in Georgia, Moscow’s attitude towards Gamsakhurdia changed: as Gamsakhurdia was a rival to Shavardnadze, who enjoyed considerable support in Moscow, references to the former leader eventually became negative.

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1 For more about the events of 9 April 1989 from a military perspective, see the interview with the military commandant of Tbilisi Igor Rodionov: Igor Rodionov: ‘The country was managed from the U.S. when Yeltsin was in Office’. Patriot, N7(51), 2007. PP. 5-7. Available in Russian at: http://pm.su/200708/24/01/Patriot-7-51.pdf
The following important phase observed in Yeltsin’s policy towards Georgia is linked to his relationship with Edward Shevardnadze.

Even before Shevardnadze was elected as the Chair of Supreme Soviet of Georgia in October 1992, he was involved in signing the Moscow Agreement on a ceasefire between the conflicting parties in Abkhazia on 3 September 1992. In the course of the signing of the agreement, Moscow exerted additional pressure on Abkhazia by inviting leaders of the North Caucasian republics to express their opinion on the matter, a step that turned out to be decisive for Vladislav Ardzinba. In general, the signed agreement favoured Georgia with respect to territorial integrity and only to a limited extent took the wishes of the Abkhaz side into account.

However, peace did not ensue and on the eve of the elections in September 1992, the Georgian media blamed Russia for its alleged support of Abkhaz separatists. The State Council of Georgia sent letters to the UN Secretary General, NATO and OSCE denouncing the ‘evident conspiracy between Abkhaz separatists and reactional forces in Russia, as shown by the resolutions of the Russian parliament in opposition to the interests of a democratic Russia under Yeltsin’s leadership’. Thus, in spite of the crisis in bilateral relations caused by the issue of Abkhazia, Yeltsin continued to be perceived by Georgians as a representative of progressive democratic forces and a supporter of Georgia’s territorial integrity.

The Abkhaz side also believed that ‘evidently Georgia enjoyed unprecedented military-political support from Russia and Yeltsin personally at the early stage of the war. Yeltsin’s support was believed to stem from the similarities of the situations in Abkhazia and Chechnya. Both Yeltsin and Shevardnadze were confident that it would be just a matter of days before the Abkhaz separatists would quietly fall, and then it would be Chechnya’s turn. Unsurprisingly, volunteers from the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus rendered military support to Abkhazia and Shevardnadze perceived this as Russian aggression against Georgia. Such ingratitude from the Head of the State Council of Georgia greatly upset Yeltsin who had provided him with military support by considerably lifting all available quotas stipulated by the Tashkent Agreement (of May 1992). Stanislav Lakoba believes that by making claims that Georgia was fighting against Russia in Abkhazia, Shevardnadze was trying to justify Georgia’s military fiasco. Lakoba also argues that by the spring of 1993, it had become evident that the Russian military deployed in Georgia had been playing a double game by supporting both Abkhazia and Georgia.

November 1992 saw the first round of negotiations with the aim of drafting Russian-Georgian agreements on friendship and partnership. Over the course of the negotiations, there were no disagreements on the status of Abkhazia or South Ossetia as Russia and Yeltsin officially supported Georgia’s territorial integrity. The central question of the negotiations was to determine the status of Russian military forces deployed in Georgia and a handover of former Soviet military assets to Georgia. However, Yeltsin’s approach to the Russian-Georgian agreement did not have the approval of all political forces in Russia. In February 1993, Sergey Shakhray, a chair of the State Committee of the Russian Federation for National Policy and Ramzan Abdulatipov, a chair of the Nationalities Council in Russia’s Supreme Council, paid a visit to Georgia. As a representative of the Russian Parliament, Abdulatipov was supposed to debunk impressions in Georgia side that the Supreme Council had been pursuing an imperialistic policy and tampering with democratic Yeltsin’s intentions to build constructive relations with Georgia. Interestingly, in a commentary dedicated to the visit, the Kommersant newspaper mostly referred to South Ossetia as the Tskhinvali Region.

In mid-March 1993, Russian-Georgian relations took a downturn, however this did not result in the suspension of the fourth round of negotiations on the Russian-Georgian agreement. Furthermore, in late March Shevardnadze delivered a speech in support of Yeltsin’s cause and its struggle against the Supreme Council: ‘I have high hopes that Yeltsin will remain in power, as there is no alternative to him’. In addition to problems with the Supreme Council while implementing his policy towards Georgia, Yeltsin was also forced to consider the position of the Confederation of Mountain People of the Caucasus. The group threatened that the people of the North Caucasus would vote against Yeltsin in an upcoming referendum of 25 April 1993 (vote of confidence on Yeltsin’s rule). Ultimately, the people of the North Caucasus voted against Yeltsin in the referendum.

It should be noted that two domestic situations had a serious impact on Russian-Georgian relations: firstly, the confrontations between Yeltsin and the Supreme Council that culminated in a parliamentary crisis and subsequent “shelling of the Parliament” in October 1993; and secondly, the situation in the North Caucasus, including the Ossetian-Ingush conflict and the first Chechen campaign, beginning with the deployment of troops in Chechnya in December 1994.

In the second half of 1993, the situation in Abkhazia deteriorated drastically. As a result of military actions by the Abkhaz side, Georgia lost control of Sukhumi. Georgia started accusing Russia of failing to act as a guarantor of the implementation of the 1993 peace agreement. However, Russia had taken certain measures: the Russian authorities made a statement con-
cerning the Abkhaz actions, followed by a visit by Pavel Grachev, the Russian defence minister, on 17 September 1993. He spoke separately to both Vladislav Ardzinba and then Edward Shevardnadze, as a result of which the Abkhaz side stopped shelling Sukhumi where Georgian troops had been deployed. In spite of this, within several weeks the Abkhaz side managed to occupy Shukhumi and declared its victory in the conflict. The situation in Georgia was further complicated by the simultaneous military attack by supporters of Gamsakhurdia who were attempting to bring the former president back to power.

Georgia was inclined to blame Russia for its defeat in Abkhazia as the latter had failed to maintain the status quo after the signing of the July ceasefire agreement. However, one should not forget that the period from the second half of September to the beginning of October 1993 was not a watershed moment for Georgia alone. In this period, Russia was going through a parliamentary crisis, which began on 21 September and culminated in the seizure of the Supreme Council building between 3-4 October 1993. Considering the nature of these developments, it would have been unrealistic to expect Russia to have provided active support to Shevardnadze. It seems that Shevardnadze himself was aware of the circumstances and in the beginning of November 1993 he expressed his support to Yeltsin in the latter’s efforts to uphold constitutional order in Russia. As soon as the parliamentary crisis appeased, Russia joined the process of resolving issues related to refugees from Abkhazia.  

As mentioned above, both the Georgian and Abkhaz sides blamed Russia for rendering support to the other party. A number of Russian commentators provide the following justifications to explain Georgia’s defeat in the conflict with Abkhazia: 1) The weakness of Georgia’s armed forces (such as the absence of a regular army, which Russia pledged to help create in the agreement of 1994); 2) ongoing military actions undertaken by Gamsakhurdia’s supporters; 3) support provided by the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus and Kazakh militias to the Abkhaz; 4) the presence of Russian military advisors in Abkhazia, as well as the provision of Russian armaments.  

A former Russian ambassador to Georgia, F.I. Stanevsky, argues that Shevardnadze, as a president, should be held responsible for his own personal role in the defeat in Abkhazia as from the a military perspective, the above-mentioned operation had been poorly planned and executed. The same may be said about Russia’s poor performance with respect to the planning and executing of its first special operations in the Chechen Republic. Again we should remember that Russian domestic politics in the first half of the 1990s were far from consistent with various political actors (the President, the Supreme Council, the leaders of the North Caucasian republics, militaries) taking different sides in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Sergey Markedonov holds that ‘to Shevardnadze’s dismay, many officers in the Russian army supported Abkhazia. However, regarding this support as consistent policy pursued by the Russian Federation would largely defy the truth. The Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus also participated in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which Tbilisi continued to perceive as Russia’s condonation of separatism. Mindful that I may seem cynical, I would still venture to make the following conclusion: The Kremlin’s ‘condonation’ of the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was in fact, an act of ‘channelling separatism’ to Abkhazia. Time has proved that Yeltsin was right to distance the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus from Nalchik, Maikop and Cherkas and direct its vigor to Gagra and Sukhumi. Political cynicism or national selfishness? Maybe. But faced with the Chechen challenge and Ossetian-Ingush conflict, the Russian authorities chose to eliminate an imminent Adyghe threat, the ghost of which later acquired quite realistic contours in the summer-autumn 1992 in Nalchik.

As for joining the CIS, officially this issue was not raised first by Shevardnadze, but by the speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Vakhtang Goguadze, a few days after military operations had resumed in Abkhazia in September 1993, but before the fall of Sukhumi. The speaker believed that membership of the CIS would contribute to securing Georgia’s territorial integrity and improving the country’s economy. At that time, the majority of Georgian MPs did not support this idea. However, at a summit of the three South Caucasian republics held in Moscow in September 1993, Shevardnadze, who shortly before had rejected this possibility, declared that Georgia would join the CIS. It should be noted that this very decision and Georgia joining the CIS allowed a peacekeeping operation to take place in Abkhazia under the aegis of this regional organisation (a series of multilateral agreements had been made in South Ossetia without any international organisations present). F.I. Stanevsky believes that for Shevardnadze, Georgia enjoyed certain benefits from its membership of the CIS. He argues that Shevardnadze, as a former foreign minister of the USSR had a wide international network. Thanks to his reputation he had considerable influence over the CIS space, which he relied on because it was easier for him to build contacts at a regional level through the confederation. At the same time, Georgia (as well as the rest of the member states) could afford to carry out only those obligations that were in line with its interests. Therefore, it could be assumed that membership was not a burden for the country.

After the parliamentary crisis had been resolved in favour of Yeltsin, it might have been expected that there would have been greater consolidation of Russian political actors with respect to Russian-Georgian relations. Nevertheless, the same problems remains: the republics of the North Caucasian continued to pressure Russia against the signing of the agreement with Georgia before the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia were finally resolved. The signing of the agreement also stirred

4 An interview with Stanevski F. I., the former ambassador of Russian Federation to Georgia, for Caucasian House of 21 November 2016.  
6 Georgian politicians are against the country joining the CIS. Kommersant, 25 September 1993. Available at: http://kommersant.ru/doc/60520  
negative reactions among all the fractions in the Russian State Duma. The agreement was nevertheless signed on 3 February 1994 but in the end, the State Duma did not ratify it. One particular article in the agreement that pledged for Russia to support the Georgian army turned out to be the most controversial as it did not comply with the interests of the Russian Parliament, Abkhazia nor South Ossetia. However, the State Duma was willing to compromise and promised to ratify the agreement as soon as the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been resolved.

The Georgian Prime Minister’s special representative for relations with Russia and former ambassador to the Russian Federation, Zurab Abashidze, wrote the following about the situation surrounding the ratification of the agreement by the Georgian parliament and resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia: ‘After the armed conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia foreign policy towards Russia was based on the hope that Moscow would contribute to the conflict’s peaceful resolution and Abkhazia’s return to Georgia. In 1993, Georgia joined the CIS and the collective defence treaty within the CIS. It also signed an agreement on the establishment of Russian military bases in Georgia for a period of 25 years. In order that the Georgian Parliament would ratify these agreements, Georgia requested that Russia meet the following two conditions: firstly, that Russia would render effective assistance for the resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia and secondly, that it would help to build the capacity of the Georgian army. The Parliament waited for around two to three years, yet neither of these conditions were ever met. When problems first began to emerge in Abkhazia, NATO and the U.S. had been nowhere to be found. However, as the situation further escalated and because of Russia’s ambivalent policies, Georgia began to seek solutions to its problems under the aegis of NATO. Had solutions to the conflict been found in a timelier manner, there would not have been any need to seek support from somewhere further away.’

CIS membership brought some positive outcomes for Georgia with respect to the Abkhaz conflict. More specifically, in January 1996 the CIS Council of Heads of state adopted a decision to introduce economic sanctions against Abkhazia so that the latter would acquire a more flexible approach towards the issue of refugees. However, Russia revoked these sanctions on 6 March 2008. Even though the decision to lift the sanctions was officially justified by Abkhazia’s alleged fulfilment of its obligations with respect to refugees, unlike Georgia who failed to do so, in fact the discontinuation of the sanctions was a response to the declaration of Kosovo’s independence on 17 February 2008 and Russia’s subsequent protests. It seems that the international context was far more important to Russia than the logic of the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in its decision to end the sanctions.

Some commentators believe that Georgia grew disappointed in Russia’s role in the resolution of the Abkhaz conflict after Russia refused to activate its peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia’s Gali region in 1998, which it justified by the desire to stay on good terms with Abkhazia. It should be noted that before this, during the first Chechen war, Georgia had made a step towards Russia and allowed the latter to deploy its border forces on the Georgian side of a section of the border with Chechnya from 1994 to 1998. After the failure of Russia to take action on the issue of Abkhazia, Georgia demanded that Russian border forces and troops be withdrawn from Georgia. The demand was further enshrined in the Agreement on the Adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.


To balance out the pro-Western foreign policy of period until 1996, Yevgeny Primakov was appointed the minister of foreign affairs. He was considered a ‘statist’ and an avid protector of Russia’s national interests in the international arena. The most evident demonstration of Primakov’s particular course was his famous ‘U-turn over the Atlantic Ocean’: when on his way to the U.S. for an official visit, he heard the news that NATO had begun to shell Yugoslavia without a UN mandate. Primakov ordered the plane to turn back as a sign of protest.

In his article published in 1996, Primakov wrote that since the end of the Cold War, the previous balance of power had yet to be replaced by a multipolar system based on equality. The article provides a number of key ideas, which, to the large extent, can be observed in Russian foreign policy discourse to this day.

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1 Moscow and Tbilisi are willing to be friends and allies. Kommersant, 4 February 1994. Available at: http://kommersant.ru/doc/70376
5 See the interview ‘Eugeny Primakov: the U-turn over the Atlantic was unavoidable’. Pravda, 24 March 2014. Available in Russian at: https://www.pravda.ru/video/politics/14152.html
The Minister made the following comment on potential NATO enlargement: ‘we are far from contemplating the idea that NATO’s enlargement is designed to harm Russia. However, in politics intentions can vary, whilst potential is a constant. Primakov put it, did not claim to have any right of veto over the ascension of any state to NATO, however, he believed that the proximity of NATO military infrastructure to Russia, ‘would worsen our geopolitical situation, particularly in military terms’. In fact, this is the position that has informed Russia’s current approach towards NATO enlargement. Even though the Basic Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (1993) make no mention of NATO, the Alliance is the fourth and fifth most frequently referenced (though indirectly) major external threat according to the military doctrine of 2000 due to fears related to its enlargement. These threats were:

- The establishment (build up) of groups of troops (forces) leading to the collapse of the existing balance of power near the state border of the Russian Federation and those of its allies, as well as in their neighbouring seas’;-

- The enlargement of military blocs and alliances to the detriment of the military security of the Russian federation.

In the Russian Military Doctrine of 2010, first in the list of main foreign military threats was ‘the desire to increase the power of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) by endowing it with global functions, carried out in violation of international law, and to move the military infrastructure of NATO member countries closer to the borders of the Russian Federation including by expanding the bloc’. The same article was kept in the Military Doctrine of 2014.

THE ‘WINNERS’ AND ‘LOSERS’ OF THE COLD WAR AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Going back to Primakov’s article, the Foreign Minister highlights yet another obstacle on the way to this multipolar world based on the principle of equality: the emergence of the post-Cold War mentality of the “leaders” and the “followers” on which the unipolar world order is based. This idea was further elaborated in Russia’s official discourse. In an article in 2000, Igor Ivanov (Russia’s foreign minister from 1998 to 2004) wrote the following: ‘…many in the U.S. and even some Western European countries, misguided by the false idea of being the “winners of the Cold War”, failed to see democratic Russia as an equal ally, which, in the best-case scenario, would have been assigned the role of a junior partner. Any indication of independence or aspiration to stand on its own grounds would have been perceived as a relapse towards Soviet ‘imperialistic’ policy’.

This very idea was later voiced by Vladimir Putin in 2014: ‘The Cold War had ended. However, it did not bring about ‘peace’, nor clear and transparent agreements on maintaining existing rules and standards, or creating new ones. The impression developed that the so-called ‘winners’ of the Cold War had decided to take advantage of the situation and reshape the world solely for themselves and their own interests’.

THE UNDEMOCRATIC CHARACTER OF INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS

According to Primakov, the third obstacle to building a multipolar world was the undemocratic nature of international economic relations. Primakov supports this assertion with reference to the U.S. Helms-Burton Act on ‘punishing’ every country that established and supported economic ties with Cuba. He characterised the Act as a ‘dangerous precedent as an attempt to domestic legislation an extraterritorial character.’ In a section of Russia’s 2016 foreign policy concept concerning...
relations with the U.S. it is indicated that ‘Russia does not recognize the extraterritorial implementation of U.S. jurisdiction outside the framework of international law and does not accept its attempts to exercise military, political, economic or any other pressure, while reserving the right to respond to hostile actions, such as by bolstering national defence and taking retaliatory or asymmetrical measures’.

**A SYSTEM OF PAN-EUROPEAN SECURITY**

Another of Primakov’s topics was later included in the draft of the Agreement on European Security promoted by the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008. In 1996, Primakov offered the following: ‘A model of European security should, one way or another, rely on all international organisations operating in the field of European security – the UN, OSCE, Council of Europe and NATO – and cooperate with the Partnership for Peace, European Commission, Western European Union and CIS. The model, however, should not only rely on, but also involve all these organisations in a single system. For this to happen, all issues related to the interaction between these organisations should be dealt with. A draft agreement, introduced by Dmitry Medvedev, failed to gain approval from Western countries, who expressed doubts that it was necessary to create new documents on principles that had already been enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and other OSCE documents. Interestingly, in his article Yevgeny Primakov offered to place the OSCE at the core of the European security system as an organization having a coordinating – rather than a controlling – function. Amidst the Ukrainian crisis, the European security system is likely to move in this direction as the past few years have certainly seen the OSCE reborn as a security organization.

**THE DEMOCRATISATION AND SUSTAINABILITY OF THE WORLD ORDER**

Scepticism towards the West’s strategy for democratization had emerged in Russian foreign policy discourse even before the colour revolutions. As Igor Ivanov wrote in 2000, the West believed that the promotion of democratic values and a transition to a liberal market economy would play a powerfully stabilizing role in foreign relations. However, the democratization process, for all its advantages, ‘is not an ‘organizing principle of the global security’. This thesis is proven by an argument about the nature of intrastate conflicts in the 1990s: ‘such conflicts originate not from the incompatibility of democracy and dictatorship, but rather from interethic and religious hostilities, social degradation and violent separatism’.

**THE NEW WORLD ORDER**

In the foreign policy concept of 1993 there was no reference to an understanding of the world order that was to replace that of the Cold War. However, the text provides a list of features that characterized the global situation at that time:

- the disappearance of the global bipolar structure;
- the multiple variables of international politics as a consequence of disappearing global bipolarity;
- the emergence of relations based on regional centers of power.

The 2000 concept talks of an emerging U.S.-promoted trend towards a unipolar world order. Meanwhile, it says Russia ‘will try to form a multipolar system of international relations, one that is reflective of the diversity of the modern world and its wide range of interests’. The effectiveness of the multipolar system can be ensured through the mutual consideration of interests, mechanisms for collective resolutions of problems, the priority of international law and the wide-scale democratization of international relations.

Also in 2000, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igor Ivanov, noted that the struggle over the key principles of the world order, which was to replace that of the Cold War, had not yet finished and the system at that time was in a transitional stage. Interestingly, speeches given by Vladimir Putin between 2014 and 2016 stressed the expediency of agreement on the princi-

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5 Russian foreign policy concept, 23 April 1993.


7 PP. 210-211.
ples of the world order, which had not been agreed since 1991. Since 2000, Russia’s foreign policy concept has been adapted three times: in 2008, after the election of Dmitry Medvedev (before the Russian-Georgian conflict), in 2013 to reflect the global financial crisis, Arab Spring, and of course, the conflict with Georgia; and in 2016, when changes were made with respect to the crisis in Russia’s relations with the West.

Even though the Foreign Policy Concept was adopted in November 2016, Putin gave perhaps the most consistent and clear picture of the New World Order in a speech at a session titled New rules to the game or the games without rules? held at the Valdai Discussion Club in October 2014. The Russian President held that the stability of the World Order during the Cold War was secured by the balance of powers, the rights of the ‘winners’, their mutual respect and the desire to negotiate. After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. declared itself the winner and argued that the emerging system of international law, as well as the system of restraints and counterbalances, could be discharged as they were believed to hamper the creation of a unipolar world order. The main problem of the unipolar model is the propensity for imposing one’s own models universally. The sovereignty of states has become increasingly dependent on their loyalty towards the U.S. At the same time, the unipolar order does not allow for the resolution of global problems (drugs trafficking, international terrorism, etc.), nor does it make global processes more manageable.

Putin additionally says that polycentrism (a term that has appeared in Russian foreign policy discourse to replace ‘multipolarity’) is not a guaranteed remedy for all problems, as the more great powers there are, the more difficult it is to negotiate. It is worth clarifying that this view on polycentrism is a new phenomenon in official Russian discourse, as previously it had referred to the idea of a world order based around numerous centres of power as an absolute virtue and counterbalance against an unfair unipolar system. Putin continues by saying that joint responses to problems are ‘difficult to achieve’: ‘success and tangible results are only feasible in those cases where the key actors in international processes are able to agree on basic interests and reasonable self-restriction, and therefore, provide an example of positive and responsible leadership. It is necessary to define clearly where the limits of unilateral actions lie and where the need for multilateral mechanisms arise in order to improve international law and solve the dilemma between the actions of the international community on security and human rights, and the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs’.

The Russian President argues that a compromise on these conflicting stances can be achieved by ‘creating a new form of interdependence’, as in the long run, this will lead to the emergence of ‘powerful regional organizations’, setting out rules for their interaction, which in its turn, would contribute to the resilience of international relations. Thus, Putin has, to some extent, returned to the Foreign Policy Concept of 1993, which highlights the emergence of regional centres of power instead of a global logic of power balancing as a key trend.

REGIONAL AND INTERNAL EXPLANATORY LOGICS OF RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

In the Foreign Policy Concept of 1993, its authors openly relayed the potential difficulties that Russia might encounter with other post-Soviet countries.

On the one hand, the creation of a ‘safety belt and benevolent neighbourhood’ around Russia (a goal which reoccurs in the concept of 2000) through the construction of a zone of ‘constructive regional cooperation’, would be optimal for Russia. The development of these neighbouring states is often described as the ‘development crisis of the post-totalitarian period’, which create grounds for national and territorial conflicts. The authors of the Concept believed that the transition to democracy and a market economy was likely to be tough and painful. The document provides an understanding of the specificity of the decentralization processes in the former USSR: ‘the development of foreign policy in a number of CIS countries is characterized by an exaggerated need to distance themselves from Russia, which is typical of the process of acquiring independence. This trend is further reinforced by territorial disputes instigated by nationalistic sentiments, including claims to Russia, as well as a kind of an allergy towards everything that can be seen as a reminder of past dependence on Soviet structures. It will take time before they come to recognize the objective reality and the fact reliance on the renewed Russia will make it easier for them to achieve their national goals’.

According to the Concept, Russia should actively engage in the process of shaping its geopolitical environment, including by, where it is needed, using force to protect international law and the rights of national minorities. At the same time, it was stressed that relations with post-Soviet countries should be raised to the level of ‘full-scale intergovernmental relations, providing them with broad cooperation based on reciprocity’. Again, this approach demonstrates that back in 1993 the former Soviet republics were hardly perceived as fully sovereign and independent from each other.

In 1999, Alexey Arbatov wrote that Russia’s major dilemma of the 1990s was finding a balance between dealing with its neighbours as sovereign states (for example, establishing international prices on energy resources) and maintaining special relations (like protection of interests of Russian military staff and civilians abroad; maintenance of industrial and military

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2 Ibid.
facilities abroad inherited by Russia; maintenance of a common defence system; interference in their domestic conflicts; protection of former Soviet borders, etc.\(^1\)

**RESOLUTION OF Conflicts**

From the perspective of the 1993 Concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation, conflict resolution should take place first and foremost, through bilateral forms of Russian mediation and peacekeeping efforts, as well as multilateral mechanisms under the CIS, which can be aided, where need be, by sanctioning these efforts through the UN, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the EU, etc.\(^2\). Interestingly, by the time the Concept was adopted, the CIS had not yet obtained observer status from the UN General Assembly, which meant that it had no right to conduct peacekeeping operations under its own mandate. The priority given to bilateral formats of settlement through Russia is also noteworthy.

Arbatov wrote that if Russia isolated itself and exclusively focused on its domestic development, it could have led to chaos and disorder in neighbouring countries as well as interventions by third parties. On the other hand, Russia’s supremacy over the region would unavoidably lead to resistance and make Russian speaking communities a hostage in the hands of local authorities, while ‘taking over territories populated by ethnic minorities by force would turn the rest of republics into hostile ‘sanitary cordon’ and eventually trigger confrontation with the West.\(^3\)

Arbatov evaluated the outcomes of Russia’s peacekeeping efforts in the post-Soviet space as dubious with respect to the country’s capacity to exert control over the situation. He believed that the special operation carried out in South Ossetia was the lone success. Even though Russia’s actions had led to the end of the military phase of the conflict, the researcher wrote that the failure to achieve a political resolution to the conflicts and their ‘frozen’ status was becoming a source of confrontation between Russia and CIS countries.\(^4\)

Dmitry Baluev called for a multi-faceted approach to the assessment of Russia’s intervention as ‘many post-Soviet countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia have difficulties in establishing their own sovereignty and for this reason they have approached Russia for its support.’\(^5\)

Baluev identified several areas that fell under Russia’s sphere of interests in the region:

- Setting up military bases for Russian troops within the territories of the former Soviet republics.
- Flexible interpretation of already concluded agreements regarding the deployment of Russian troops to the territories of other CIS countries. For instance, Moldova insisted on the withdrawal of Russian troops after the expiration of a three-year term, while the Russian defence minister Kondratiev declared that Russian troops should stay and continue to provide security.
- Common security by signing an agreement on collective security, joint border protection and joint peacekeeping operations.
- Launch negotiations for setting up a Union state with Belarus and multilateral negotiations on establishing a customs union.

The last item on Baluev’s list was Russia’s leadership in the CIS space.\(^6\)

The role of the West and Russia in the South Caucasus

The renowned specialist of the history of the Caucasus, Vladimir Degoev, argued that ‘Russia’s ownership of the North Caucasus, the size of which is twice as large as the South Caucasus, makes the country a main ‘Caucasian’ state and a lead actor in pan-Caucasian politics.’\(^7\) The researcher wrote that this is something that the West often forgets about when they offer Georgia and Azerbaijan their ‘protection’ from Russia. The West believes that Russia should coordinate its policies in the South Caucasus with the West, while the West itself, and particularly the U.S., is not going to communicate anything about its own policies to Russia and instead interacts with regional states on a bilateral basis. Degoev’s concerns were mostly caused by the fact that models of regional security offered by the West have no role for Russia, nor for other traditional regional players like Iran and Turkey. In addition, the EU and the U.S., which can be considered as non-regional actors, have been trying to play a lead role in the South Caucasus.\(^8\)

Degoev concluded that ‘Moscow, at least for its own sake, has to formulate its principle message in a very clear and

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\(^{2}\) Ibid.

\(^{3}\) Ibid.


\(^{7}\) PP. 72-73.
unequivocal manner: Russia is a major Caucasian state from a geographic, geopolitical and historical perspective. Its highest priority in the region is to ensure security, a goal which is directly linked with the international status and foreign policy orientation of the South Caucasian countries.’

Alexey Malashenko characterised the conflicts in Georgia in the 1990s as both regional and internal and raised the question as to whether or not Russia capitalised on these conflicts to influence domestic affairs in conflicting countries. The scholar asserted that the correct answer to the above question is ‘yes’: ‘in their attempts to manipulate conflicting parties, Russian diplomats and its military often act so rigidly that they undermine Russia’s reputation rather than foster it. Unsurprisingly, local elites in South Caucasian countries would prefer international brokerage than rely on Russia when it comes to the regulation of domestic and interstate disputes’. This inefficiency, according to Malashenko, came from the fact that at the beginning of the 1990s Russia had not formulated its interests in the conflict zones. They had not decided whether they should regulate or support the conflicts, or what instruments they should use towards these aims. In addition, any attempt to exert pressure on the South Caucasian countries aimed at preserving former influence of the USSR rather than enlarging Russian presence in the region. Malashenko recommended that Russia pay closer attention to the internal processes in the neighbouring countries of the CIS, as Russia should adjust its foreign policy in line with these processes.

Kortunov agreed that Transcaucasia’s military-political issues could not possibly be resolved without Russia’s involvement through ‘active brokerage, diplomacy and limited peacekeeping acts’. Without Russia’s active role a ‘vacuum of power’ (a term in frequent use in the first half of the 2000s) will be filled by the U.S. and Germany, which have been trying to squeeze Russia out from the region. Turkey and Iran are also likely to attempt to fill up the vacuum. In order to avert this scenario, Kortunov suggested thinking about the creation of a full-scale military union of Russia, Georgia and Armenia.

A RUSSIAN MODEL FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Not so many Georgian experts would agree on the assumption that Russia can play a positive role in the South Caucasus. However, there have been some cases of positive expectations.

At the same time, even authors who are considered to be radically pro-American and anti-Russian demonstrated examples of positive expectations that could exist in Georgian society towards Russia. However, these expectations did not come true due to the lack of will and resources on the Russian side to play a constructive role. For example, in his article published in 2006, the then president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Alexander Rondeli wrote: ‘Russia does not, nor will have enough resources or desire to play a constructive role in Georgia, that is to help [the latter] “stand up on its feet”, build a modern, stable and democratic state with a new economy’. Instead of this, Rondeli argues, Russia wants to push Georgia back into the Russian orbit and strives to place pro-Russian authorities amongst Georgia’s leadership.

According to this Georgian expert, the problem lies in ‘Russia’s failure to offer its fragile neighbour a somewhat attractive model’ because Russia, ‘with its propensity towards authoritarianism, did not wish to support Georgia in its efforts to become a democratic state’. In addition, scrutiny into the Russian official documents, and in particular, the Annual reviews of foreign relations and diplomatic activities, and publications of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia since 2007 help to reveal the model that Russia has been planning to offer to the region’s countries.

In a section concerning the CIS in the 2006 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ review, it is written that ‘Russia is interested in having friendly, prosperous, democratic and stable neighbours along its borders’. This wording debunks the widespread perception among Western experts and politicians suggesting that Russia is interested in having weak authoritarian neighbours, which continue to be dependent on Russia. On the contrary, the review further indicates that the emergence of weak and dependent states in the region poses considerable threats to its development.

The review also provided a blueprint to help Russia transform itself into a leader of the post-Soviet space, more specifically through ‘developing an attractive and realistic model to offer to its neighbours in order to facilitate an evolutionary transition to fully-fledged market economies and democracy’. There are two aspects to this that need to be highlighted: Firstly, the review outlined that the establishment of such models would only be a foundation for leadership, meaning that at that time Russia did not consider itself a fully-grown leader. Secondly, the ways in which Russia could achieve leadership status were also important for the country. In this particular case, we are talking about so-called soft power, which would be dealt with in official foreign policy documents later on. In its essence, soft power is the elaboration of attractive models of development, which may be adopted by other states. The authors of the review believed that this model was an evolutionary

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1. P. 76. 
2. PP. 89-90, volume 3. 
3. P. 90. 
4. PP. 89-90, volume 3. 
5. P. 105. 
6. Most researchers of the 1990s referred to the region as Transcaucasia. The paper uses unified approach by using the term ‘South Caucasus’. 
8. P. 105. 
10. Ibid, p. 78. 
11. Ibid, p. 79.
and complete transition to a market economy and democracy. One of the possible interpretations of the above-mentioned thesis is as follows: at that time, there were no developed market systems nor democratic regimes in CIS member states. In addition, it appears that the thesis focuses on an evolutionary nature to the proposed model rather than the revolutionary paths pursued by Georgia and Ukraine. In the period following the Rose Revolution and the Orange Revolution, fears amongst the Russian establishment of a possible revolution and change of power in Russia had become much more important. Therefore, the authors of the review offer the same model of progressive development and reformation to those countries that had not been affected by revolutions, with transformations through gradual development and reform.

The same ideas are proposed in a section that deals with the situation in the Central Asian republics after the end of the US-led operation in Afghanistan. It is indicated that Russia should work further to develop ‘attractive, competitive and feasible perspectives for both political elites and the broader public’ within the Central Asian states. It is also underlined that Russia could offer an evolutionary path towards transformation without shockwaves in contrast to the West, which favoured so-called colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space.

In the modern context it is interesting to observe how ‘Russia’s European choice’ was shared by the public and political elite of other CIS countries. This approach demonstrates that Russia had no doubts over its major direction of cooperation: the EU. However, later reviews contain a variety of vectors with considerable attention being paid to non-European directions of the country’s foreign policy.

With respect to economic cooperation in the CIS, there was a strong and consistent suggestion in the document of the need to de-politicise economic relations between member countries. The following phrase regarding abstaining from ‘favouritism’ in relations with CIS countries is quite indicative: ‘What is meant here is the crucial element of mutual emancipation, which may disperse all vestiges of the past and instead build pragmatic, future-oriented relations based on mutual trust and mutual benefits.’ Once again, it should be noted that such an approach contradicts the widespread opinion in the West that Russia has strived to maintain the dependence of regional countries through economic cooperation.

In a section dedicated to the CIS as a geopolitical priority, the authors conveyed a series of interesting suggestions that uncover the philosophy of Russian politics in the post-Soviet space. In the document, it is indicated that the CIS space is not merely a region that harbours Russia’s interests in the fields of security and economy, but also a source of challenges to Russia’s national security. The review of 2006 remains the only one that provides an honest account of Russia’s relations with CIS member states and conveys the country’s grievances alongside achievements in these very relations.

The 2006 review was the only one that mentioned the South Caucasian (and Central Asian) regions. Subsequent reviews have referred to bilateral relations with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Thus, we can see a shift either in official language and terminology or the view of the South Caucasus as a coherent region has subsided.

An important thought that has run through the integration of the post-Soviet space is that the ultimate goal of such partnership is to create an economic system ‘that would ensure efficient development for all of its participants’. Overall, the above-described positions suggest that Russia has been trying to persuade its partners within the CIS that regional integration into the post-Soviet space will ultimately benefit all those involved, while integration with other international bodies would be far less productive. Russia tried to use argumentative persuasion rather than ideological slogans to attract the other former Soviet republics to its form of integration.

THE LEVEL OF PERSONAL INTERACTION

PUTIN-SHEVARDNADZE

The following phase of bilateral relations is linked with Vladimir Putin taking the office of the prime minister of Russia on 9 August 1999, a year after the collapse of the ruble in August 1998 and two days after a militia groups raided Dagestan, an event which triggered the second Chechen war.¹ The decision to appoint someone with a record of the service in the security services was based on the necessity to ensure national security.

Relations between Russia and Georgia began to deteriorate in early November 1999 as a result of Russia’s operations in Chechnya. The tension in Georgia ensued after Putin disclosed the content of a conversation that took place between Yeltsin and Shevardnadze at the end of October 1999 about the possibility of providing Russian troops access to Chechnya via Georgia. The conversation also concerned joint patrolling of the border with Chechnya by Russian and Georgian border forces. It was believed that Shevardnadze, who initially gave his consent, later changed his mind. According to the Russian media, Shevardnadze’s change of decision was a result of the U.S.’s condemnation of Russia’s military actions in Chechnya and the former’s promises to channel greater financial support to Georgia. In turn, Shevardnadze declared that he did not want to interfere in Russia’s domestic affairs in any way.² Russia took the refusal as a rejection of their strategic partnership and proposed to introduce visa regulations in order to prevent militants entering the country via Georgia (the visa regime took effect in December 2000). However, in reality this move was Moscow’s retaliation for Georgia’s alleged rejection of their strategic partnership. The visa regime for Georgian citizens has never been lifted, even though Georgia has made positive moves forward.

¹ Today Dagestan will be separated from Russia. Kommersant, 10 August 1999. Available in Russian at: http://kommersant.ru/doc/223416
The former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Irakli Menagarishvili (1995–2003), put together a list of Russia’s demands that Georgia had to comply with in order to avert a visa regime. These demands were ‘to allow Russia’s military bases to remain in Georgia; to provide access for Russian troops to airfields and bases in order to undertake operations in Chechnya; Georgia’s membership to the Customs Union and the newly created Eurasian Economic Community; and to turn down a project on the transportation of Caspian oil through the proposed Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline.\(^1\)

By 1999, it had been two years since Georgia had embarked on an anti-Russian path under the GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova) Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development, and in April 1999 Georgia (together with Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan) refused to prolong its participation in the Collective Security Treaty signed it 1992. When it comes to the wider context, one should not forget that 1999 turned out to be quite an uneasy year for relations between Russia and the West: in March 1999, NATO launched an air attack against Yugoslavia without a prior mandate from the UN, while April 1999 saw the first wave of NATO enlargement since the collapse of the USSR (with Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic joining the Alliance). As tensions in Russian-Georgian relations were reaching their peak in 1999, a historic OSCE summit took place in Istanbul to discuss an updated version of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.\(^2\)

The following phase of Putin-Shevardnadze relations reached a new level. For the first time, Putin met the leaders of most CIS countries in the capacity of the acting president of the Russian Federation in February 2000, shortly before he was officially elected a president in elections on 26 March 2000. Interestingly, media reports of the time suggested that there were some hopes among the Georgian public as they expected that the newly elected Russian president would be able to bring about some positive changes in bilateral relations. Shortly before he took off to participate in a CIS summit, Shevardnadze himself proposed that Putin be selected as a chair of the CIS (the Tajik president, Emomali Rakhmon, was not optimistic about being unanimously elected as the chair, even though according to the rotation rule it was Tajikistan’s turn to have the chair).\(^3\) Upon his return to Tbilisi, Shevardnadze made a statement on the need for building equal relations with Russia in order to maintain independence.\(^4\)

Shortly afterwards, bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia developed amidst disputes over the alleged presence, or absence, of Chechen militants in Pankisi gorge (during Igor Ivanov’s visit to Georgia in June 2000),\(^5\) and discussions over Georgia’s debt, the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia and the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (during the August 2000 CIS summit in Yalta).

The summer and fall of 2001 saw the crisis in Pankisi gorge further exacerbated after Georgia once again attempted to resolve the conflict in Abkhazia by using force and support offered by the Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelaev (the previous attempt took place in May 1998 in the Gali region). The former Russian Ambassador to Georgia, F. Stanevski, argued that by making these two moves Shevardnadze put himself in a difficult position: the first operation in 1998 was poorly prepared while the second one took place against the backdrop of 9/11. In addition, the U.S. authorities regarded Gelaev as a terrorist and therefore it was difficult for Shevardnadze to justify this partnership with Gelaev to his American partners.\(^6\)

In October 2001, Vladimir Putin said that Russia would not try to keep Georgia in the CIS if the latter decided to leave the Commonwealth.\(^7\) According to Putin Russia was even ready to discuss the withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping forces from Abkhazia as demanded by the Georgian Parliament.

During a meeting between Vladimir Putin and Shevardnadze at the Kremlin in November 2001, the Russian President pledged that Georgia could count on Russia in the former’s attempts to fix its economic problems. Notably, the meeting took place amidst yet another deterioration in bilateral relations after Georgia blamed Russia for violating its sovereignty and bombing its territory (Pankisi gorge) on the night of 28 November 2001.

In December 2001, Shevardnadze declared that Russian peacekeeping forces deployed in Abkhazia were irreplaceable because the international community was preoccupied with the fight against international terrorism in Afghanistan after the events of 11 September 2001.\(^8\) In turn, Russia stopped blocking the UN resolution on the core principles of Abkhazia’s status within Georgia.\(^9\) By February 2002, Georgia disclosed the presence of militants and Chechen refugees in Pankisi gorge. However, it was only after by Vladimir Putin’s harsh statements that Georgia agreed to hand them over to Russia: ‘if the Georgian authorities are unable to create a safety zone along the Russian-Georgian border, continue to ignore UN resolution 1373 of 28 September 2001, and refuse to put an end to rebel attacks in areas adjacent to Russia’s borders, we retain the right to act pursuant to Article 51 of the UN Charter entitling each and every member-state to exercise its inherent right to individual or collective self-defense.’\(^10\) Georgia agreed to hand over the fighters but continued to shift some of the blame to Russia. Later on, a Georgian spokesperson, Nino Burjanadze, stated that the Pankisi crisis was ‘on the one hand a continuation of the Ab-

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\(^7\) Putin: Russia will not keep Georgia in the CIS. Kommersant. 12 October 2001. Available at: http://kommersant.ru/doc/924634

\(^8\) Russian peacekeepers will remain in Abkhazia. Kommersant. 4 December 2001. Available in Russian at: http://kommersant.ru/doc/300350


khazia crisis, and on the other an attempt to justify the failure of the Russian troops in Chechnya. Interestingly, in January 2003 Richard Armitage, the United States Deputy Secretary of States, declared that the U.S. was not going to criticize Russia if the latter decided to deliver a preventive attack against Chechen fighters in Pankisi gorge.

**PUTIN-SAAKASHVILI**

The Rose Revolution is considered to have been the main turning point in relations between Georgia and Russia in the Putin period. Shevardnadze had lengthy consultations with Russia regarding Georgia’s domestic political situation against the backdrop of the November 2003 elections in order to guarantee Russia’s non-intervention in the events that ensued after the elections, an attempt that proved to be successful thanks to a series of negotiations.

However, it is worth noting that even before their defeat in the Rose Revolution, Georgian elites had been accusing the U.S. of intervening in Georgia’s domestic affairs as well as of organizing opposition and funding the revolution. For instance, in November 2003 Aslan Abashidze made the following statement: ‘the ongoing campaign has been funded from inside and outside’. The people who have taken to the streets have been trained in how to conduct such demonstrations. We cannot be at ease unless the plans of those behind this campaign change or they lose their funding’. Interestingly, it was only later on that Russia started to employ the idea of foreign interference in their own official rhetoric.

On 23 November 2003, Igor Ivanov paid a visit to Tbilisi where he brokered a deal between Saakashvili and Shevardnadze which led to the decision the latter to resign. According to some sources, Shevardnadze’s decision sent shockwaves to the Kremlin where they expected Shevardnadze to call early elections. It is important to note that at that time Ivanov did not regard the November events as a coup. However, these events were perceived as a revolt in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Adjara whose leaders took part in negotiations held on 28 November 2003 in Moscow. Media outlets reported that these three regions gave their consent that Russia could protect their populations and territories from Georgia’s new leadership, which effectively posed a threat to them. However, at that time Russia saw this as a potential opportunity rather than a realistic plan before the situation in Georgia began to change.

Newly elected President Saakashvili planned his very first international trip to Russia in February 2004, which experts regarded as a signal of some sort of his willingness to launch a constructive dialogue and possibly for expressing gratitude for Russia’s decision not to support Shevardnadze during the events of the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili made the following statement: ‘I have come here to make friends with you. Russia is a great state while we are just a small country, albeit with our own interests, pride and history. This very history is linked with great Russia. We hope that we will resolve all our issues. Even though it may take time, eventually dialogue will yield results’. During Saakashvili’s visit, Vladimir Putin noted the following: ‘I would like to draw your attention to our willingness to always accept Georgia’s offer to discuss various issues, in fact every issue including the re-structuring of debt and energy provision.’

In his interview with Izvestya published in April 2004, Saakashvili talked with enthusiasm about Putin always keeping his promises: ‘Putin has supported the concept of “Georgia’s territorial integrity” and by doing so forced the Adjarian leader to agree to a more constructive dialogue with Georgia’. Saakashvili also stated that ‘we are now strongly convinced that the Russian troops which remain on Georgian territory will either support the legitimate authorities of the country, or, in the most extreme circumstances, observe neutrality’.

According to the Georgian President, he had had weekly phone calls with Vladimir Putin, which contributed to the predictability of bilateral relations. Saakashvili complained that because of that hostile opponents had accused him of being a Russian agent. ‘With thanks to God, we have turned past this sad page in Georgian-Russian relations once and for all’, added Saakashvili.

The crisis in Adjara in Spring 2004 led to a bloodless revolution that followed scenario that Moscow had to approve: it was the Georgian side who approached Russia with the request that it played the role of mediator (again through Igor Ivanov, this time in the capacity of the Secretary of the Russian Security Council) and provide political shelter to Aslan Abashidze should he agree to resign.

Unsurprisingly, Russia was generally cautious about the prospects of cooperation with Saakashvili in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution. For instance, in his 2004 article, the Deputy Director of the Fourth Department for the CIS Countries in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, A. Chepurin, wrote that ‘promises made by Saakashvili to start relations from a “blank page” were perceived as accepting relations on “Georgian terms”, whereby Georgia was imposing its own positions in distressing conditions, and that the latter decided to launch a preventive attack against Chechen fighters in Pankisi gorge’.

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1. ‘We will be wise enough not even to declare that we are going to bomb Russian territory’. Kommersant. 16 September 2002. Available in Russian at: [http://kommersant.ru/doc/341142](http://kommersant.ru/doc/341142)
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
cussions of real issues while stressing ‘friendship’ and ‘fraternity’ in joint declarations. Therefore, Saakashvili’s statements about friendship with Russia were met with considerable scepticism in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Russian experts were not optimistic about Saakashvili. They described Saakashvili’s actions during his first term as ‘the swaying of Tbilisi from one side to another’ with frantic campaigns that were meant to demonstrate ‘a desire to be friends’ with Russia but made no progress in resolving any practical issues on the Russian-Georgian agenda. The situation was further exacerbated by the unpredictability, sporadic actions and frequent impulsive behaviour demonstrated by our hero – Saakashvili. Russian policy analysts often resorted to using metaphors and informal expressions (such as ‘our hero’) when writing about Saakashvili, something that is not typical of scholarly literature.

The following comment was made by a Russian author concerning the expectations amongst the Russian leadership of partnership with Saakashvili in early 2005: ‘Unfortunately, there has never been a transfer from ‘nice words’ and affirmations on the Georgian side to real actions and we are not to be blamed for this. Victorious euphoria during the first months, coupled with the ‘bloodless’ integration of Adjara, generated a feeling of false confidence that they are capable of anything and that they can resolve the ongoing inter-ethnic conflicts with Ossetia and Abkhazia overnight by using force’. Interestingly, this forecast and assessment turned out to be quite true as president Saakashvili chose a military path to resolving the conflicts with the separatist regions.

The ‘honeymoon period’ of the relationship with Georgia came to an end by late 2004. Some sources suggest that Putin’s treatment of Saakashvili as a junior partner drastically changed after it had become clear that the President of Georgia was supporting the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

However, there is another explanation: Adjara’s integration may be analysed against the backdrop of the Georgian authorities’ aim to restore the central authorities’ control over Georgian territories in order to harness state sovereignty, which entailed a fight against ethno-criminal communities controlling border regions and hampering the development of economic ties with neighboring countries. These efforts coincided with a ‘new phase of the strengthening of Russia’s positions at an international level: Georgia’s final decision to aim to integrate with NATO and EU further complicated this situation. Partnership with NATO and military assistance to Georgia stirred concerns within the Russian military leadership, which had been trying to obtain information on the actual scale of such assistance and the deployment of forces in the region to carry out intelligence activities.’

Soon relations between the two countries headed into a downturn marked by two dramatic instances, the ‘Wine Scandal’ and the ‘Spy Scandal’ that both took place in 2006. On 27 March 2006, imports of Georgian wine were banned Russia. It is possible to account for these events solely from the perspective of bilateral relations between Russia and Georgia, however, it is worth keeping in mind that the Georgian wine was not the only product banned for importation, with Moldovan wine sharing the same fate. It took a relatively shorter period of time to achieve an agreement on Moldovan wine and subsequently the ban was lifted by the end of 2007, although it was re-imposed on several occasions in the following years. As for the embargo on Georgian wine, it should be noted that Abkhaz wine was also banned. However, the Abkhaz authorities established contacts with the Federal Service for Supervision of Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being, as a result of which Abkhaz wine companies were allowed on the Russian market while Georgian ones were not. In addition, between 2006 and 2013, the Georgian mineral water brands Borjomi and Nabelghlavi were banned. According to Russia’s chief sanitary doctor, G. Onishchenko, in 2007 the Federal Service for Supervision of Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being tried to establish contacts with its Georgian counterparts to negotiate issues related to the quality of the products and possibilities of lifting the embargo, but the Georgian authorities did not show much enthusiasm. Interestingly, the population of Russia, as revealed by findings of public opinion polls, had approved of the ban over the poor quality wine.

Moreover, the Russian population also supported the harsh measures of the Russian authorities in the aftermath of the so-called ‘Spy Scandal’ of 2006. As a response to the scandal, Russia recalled its ambassador to Georgia, minimised diplomatic relations and undertook a series of measures which are sometimes referred to as the ‘expulsion of Georgians from Russia’. Some experts regard the Kremlin’s rough response as ‘emotional’, and therefore, not long after the Russian authorities made a decision to refrain from its anti-Georgian campaign.

There are several explanations as to why the anti-Georgian campaign was curtailed so abruptly. These explanations include harsh reactions from the West, negative publicity and coverage of the campaign by the Russian media, and awareness that the anti-Georgian campaign did harm to the Georgian public rather than Saakashvili’s regime.11

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10 For more details on the course of the campaign and its coverage by Russian media please see the report from Memorial, ‘Anti-Georgian Campaign: Discrimination Based on Ethnicity. (End of September 2006 – October 2006). Available in Russian at: http://old.memo.ru/hr/discrim/georgia.html
Chapter 3. A SHIFT IN RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY (2007-2016):
BUILDING ‘SOVEREIGN DEMOCRACY’

DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT OF RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY

RUSSIAN NATION BUILDING AND APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF SEPARATISM

In order to understand Russia’s approach to interethnic conflicts across the post-Soviet space, including the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian cases, it is important to understand Russian approach to nation-building. Unlike other countries that emerged in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had previous experience of independent statehood before 1917. However, it lacked the experience of building a nation-state, as it had been an empire before the October 1917 Revolution. In 1991, Russia faced the task of building the Russian nation. ‘Dear Russian citizens’ – an address often used by the first Russian president Boris Yeltsin – made his audience smile rather than produce a sense of pride and belonging to the nation.

A definition of the Russian nation emerged only in the Russian Constitution adopted after the parliamentary crisis in December 1993: ‘we, the multi-ethnic people of the Russian Federation’. However, even by the end of 2016 there was little understanding at the official level of what the term ‘Russian nation’ meant. In October 2016, while speaking at a session of the Council for Interethnic Relations, Putin supported a proposal to elaborate a federal law on the Russian Nation and Management of Interethnic Relations based on a Strategy for the state national policy for 2012-2025. Therefore, it is obvious that the process of nation-building in Russia is far from complete and the country’s political elites are yet to find a unifying national idea.

Overall, it is difficult to conclude that the process of nation-building is complete in other post-Soviet countries. The former republics have inherited a series of problems from the Soviet Union in the field of interethnic relations. The newly formed states have not completely hastened to shake off all their Soviet inheritances: Sergey Markedonov argues that the departure from ideology did not automatically entail the rejection of the territorial-administrative boundaries that were established under the Soviet Union without consideration for historical interethnic relations. In addition, the new elites lacked experience of ensuring national peace without resorting to imperial or Soviet instruments. Consequently, the elites in the newly formed independent states chose a strategy of ethnic nationalism, which, as Markedonov believes, automatically meant that the legitimacy of such states was partially or completely compromised by ethnic minorities that did not accept this model of the nation. In Georgia, this was the case with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In addition, it is important to understand the specifics of the relations between so-called titular nations and ethnic minorities under the Soviet Union. As noted by V. Tishkov and Y. Shabaev, historically national minorities were excluded from the ‘membership’ in titular nations within the so called national republics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this practice was inherited by the new elites who came to think that a nation is an ethnic community that belongs to a particular territory and forms the respective state.

The Russian approach to nation-building is based on the historically shaped conception from the Soviet period of ‘bad’ nationalism that was oppressive, and ‘good’ nationalism that gave freedom to the different regions. The inertia of this Soviet approach prompted Yeltsin to make his famous statement addressed to regions of Russia: ‘take as much sovereignty as you can swallow!’. Based on the very thesis that ‘liberating’ nationalism is unequivocally positive, Russia supported separatist territories at the beginning of the 1990s. However, the emergence of a separatist movement in Russia’s North Caucasian republics, and separatist sentiments in some other republics (for instance in Tatarstan, Bashkiriya and Yakutia), led to changes in Russia’s official approach to supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan.

The issuance of Russian passports to residents of unrecognized republics, generally, should be analyzed within a wider context of the Russian strategy for resolving interethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Foreign experts often see this passportization as a manifestation of Russia’s neo-imperialistic policy. On the other hand, the Russian understanding is that the policy of ‘passportization’ is a part of a unified Russian nation-building effort rather than an effort to manage conflicts abroad.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Russian and Russian speaking communities continued to reside beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, which led to the idea of Russians as a divided nation. The introduction of dual citizenship in 1993 turned out not to be very successful in resolving this issue. The initiative was later followed by the adoption of the law on the Russian citizenship in 2002, which allowed ‘USSR passport holders having resided or residing in the former Soviet republics, who have been denied citizenship of these countries and are therefore stateless persons’ to obtain Russian citizenship. This wording allowed ethnic Russians residing in other former Soviet republics to obtain Russian passports. At the same time, the opportunity was granted to residents of the unrecognised states of Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In general, before the Russian-Georgian conflict of 2008 the Russian ‘compatriots policy’ was not coherent enough and did not quite correlate with the goals of Russian foreign policy. As Igor Zevelyov argues, the final legitimation of the...
discourse of Russians as a divided nation was provided in Vladimir Putin’s speech of 18 March 2014 after the integration of Crimea. According to Zevelyov, Russian elites securitized the concept of the ‘Russian world’: Russia is now responsible for providing security to a community bigger than that in the country itself.1

**GROUNDS FOR INTERVENTION**

There is a perception that the Russian stance towards international intervention and sovereignty is ambiguous and inconsistent. For instance, with respect to the conflict with Georgia in 2008, Georgia’s actions against South Ossetia is reminiscent of Russia’s actions in Chechnya. The recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and a later integration of Crimea, contradicts Russia’s position on the recognition of independence of Kosovo by Western states. Russia’s leading role in peacekeeping operations in Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Tajikistan in the 1990s without a UN mandate contradicts Russia’s position regarding the NATO operation in Kosovo in 1999 and the U.S.-led operation in Iraq in 2003, as both operations were launched without a UN mandate.

Some Western saying that experts would explain this contradiction by authoritarian Russia (as many Western countries see it), in the interests of the ruling regime, has been hampering the principle of ‘responsibility to protect’ in order to prevent precedents of intervention in domestic affairs. The basic Western assumption is that participating in the settlement of the conflicts of the 1990s and the conflict with Georgia in 2008 were indicators of Russian neo-imperialism. However further assessment may be based on the question as to whether these trends were positive or negative. In addition, there may be alternative explanations accounting for inconsistencies in Russia’s stance.

If one shares the view that Russia has neo-imperial ambitions, wants to be an arbiter in all post-Soviet conflicts and support separatist republics (Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh), then it would be logical to expect Russia not to stop at military stage of settlement in the 1990s, but to push for a political resolution beneficial for Russian interests, instead of long-term unsuccessful mediation. However, it did not happen. Similarly, in 2008 Russia did not send its troops to Tbilisi and did not overthrow Saakashvili’s regime, even though this would have ensured the security and safety of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In addition, Russia could have justified such a decision through the responsibility to protect principle. In order to provide security to the two unrecognised states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it made a decision to recognize their independence, but refrained from changing Saakashvili’s regime with which the Kremlin had serious issues. Surely, there is a conventional realistic explanation to these events: At the beginning of the 1990s, issues related to Chechen separatism were of the utmost importance, because of which neo-imperialistic ambitions had given way to the need to prevent the emergence of separatism in the post-Soviet space. In other words, neo-imperialism (a desire to annex separatist territories as colonies of sorts) clashed with the imperative of protecting the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation (the problem of separatism in the 1990s). By 2000, the Chechen problem had been resolved to a certain degree and the risk of separatism in Russia had diminished as compared with the 1990s. Therefore, Russia changed its approach and made the decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

**THE INFORMATION PROPAGANDA DIMENSION OF THE 2008 CONFLICT**

The conflict of August 2008 had a clear propagandistic dimension: the rapid development of events made it difficult for the international community and the societies of the countries involved to what was happening, as a result of which the interpretations of those involved played an important role. Military actions were accompanied by an information war, the first phase of which was won by Georgia, while Russia had to go on the defensive and respond to accusations from the Georgian side who had painted their own picture of the developments that had been aired and released through international media. In spite of Russia’s military victory in the conflict, the country failed to win the information war. In the aftermath of the conflict of 2008, its resolution was raised to the international level with the involvement of a number of international organisations and the creation of international platforms. For this very reason, it had become crucially important for both Moscow and Tbilisi to justify their actions to the international community rather than to their own societies.

The first important aspect is the clear dividing line between M. Saakashvili and the people of Georgia. Official rhetoric underscored that Russia was in conflict with a specific individual who had made a specific decision while there were no such problems between the Russian and Georgian nations. In his speech delivered on 26 August 2008, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Lavrov, told the audience: ‘I am confident that the Georgian nation, with whom we share the most sincere friendship and sympathy, deserves authorities who are capable of taking a good care of their country and avoiding those moves that can do irreparable harm to their own country—authorities who are able to build relations with neighbouring peoples based on mutual respect, benevolence and equality.2

Another initiative, aimed at the international community, was to qualify Georgia’s actions against the communities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as genocide. This line of assessment was seen in the statements of D. Medvedev, who provided

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justifications for Russia’s recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹ The international practice of recognizing the independence of unrecognized states demonstrates that at the current stage in the development of international relations, wide-scale violations of human rights, including genocide, can serve as sufficient grounds for recognizing the independence of the state in question. It was the very need to legitimize such actions at the international level that prompted the usage of the above mentioned term. Metaphors referring to the Holocaust were used to draw the attention of Western partners to the developments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the conflict, such as in the following statement regarding the termination of the delivery of gas: ‘Russia has repeatedly raised concerns at numerous international formats and with its Western partners, and stated that it is unacceptable to allow for the ‘suffocation by gas’ of South Ossetia.’²

THE PERSONAL LEVEL OF INTERACTION

MEDVEDEV-SAAKASHVILI

The circumstances surrounding the conflict of August 2008 have been well researched and accounted for in scholarly literature and expert comments. Thus, not to be repetitive, the section below provides just one very characteristic example of relationship between Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia.

In his interview in 2011 about the political conflict between Russia and Georgia, Medvedev talked about personal antipathy towards the Georgian president: ‘Saakashvili has committed a crime against the Russian Federation and its citizens. He ordered the killing of hundreds of our citizens, including members of peacekeeping troops. I will never forgive him and I will never talk to him’.³ After having named the Georgian president “a person with whom he would not shake hands”, Medvedev added the following: ‘the President of Georgia should be grateful to me as, I, at some point stopped the advancement of troops. If they had entered Tbilisi, it is very likely that Georgia would have had someone else as a president as we speak’.⁴

One of the possible explanations of the strong dislike demonstrated by Medvedev is that it was the result of a disappointment and vain expectations from the first meeting between Medvedev and Saakashvili on 6 June 2008: the meeting provided some hope for restoring a constructive dialogue. More specifically, during the meeting Saakashvili stated that ‘Russia and Georgia are two countries that have been very close to each other from historical, cultural and human perspectives. The current situation is artificial.’⁵ As stated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, the meeting ‘made the Russian side feel that the President of Georgia in fact wants to make conflict resolution a priority’.⁶ It was only two months later that Georgia started resolving the conflict with South Ossetia through military force, a move that Russia perceived as a breach of trust.

Another line of personal relations: after the conflict of 2008, Shevardnadze maintained positive relations with Putin on a personal level: in an interview published in 2012, the former president of Georgia said that he had known Putin since he was a child and that ‘there is no reason to assume that Putin’s return will be disastrous for Georgia’ because ‘Russia is our great neighbour. Why does Russia need to occupy Georgia? It is already entrenched in our economy. A large part of our strategic assets, that is what we know and what we do not know, are already in Russia’s hands. It has recognized the independence of Abkhazia and Samachablo (South Ossetia) because it has no reason to occupy Georgia’.⁷

It should be noted that there has been a series of internal political implications of the 2008 conflict for the Russian authorities. The Russian military expert, S. Melkov, gave the following as the key implications of the conflict: 1) the consolidation of Russian society; 2) the political elite as a whole supported the use of force and the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; 3) Russian president D. Medvedev demonstrated a strong political will to protect the interests of Russian citizens; 4) reputation of the Russian military forces within the Russian society has considerably improved.⁸

One can make the following generalization drawn from an assessment of Saakashvili’s term: enthusiasm for the new leader who ascended to power as a result of the Rose Revolution was demonstrated by the Russian media rather than experts, political researchers or representatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It took the latter little time to observe that promises were not bringing about any real actions. Moreover, many experts managed to predict the course of developments even before the 2008 conflict based on observations of Saakashvili’s behaviour.

At the same time, it is important to understand the context of the crisis in bilateral relations with respect to a turning point in Russia’s foreign policy (for more details please refer to the respective section of the paper). By 2006–2007, Russia had already started engaging more actively in developing a global agenda and openly disclosing its discontent with the unipolar

Footnotes:


³ Medvedev: Saakashvili’s victory in the elections is unlikely to improve the relations of Georgia with the Russian Federation. RIA Novosti. 5 August 2001. Available in English at: https://ria.ru/politics/20110805/412248918.html

⁴ Medvedev reveals why Saakashvili should be grateful to him. RIA Novosti. 5 August 2011. Available in Russian at: https://ria.ru/politics/20110805/412429796.html

⁵ Medvedev and Saakashvili agree that there are no unresolved issues in relations between the Russian Federation and Georgia. Izvestia. 6 June 2008. Available in Russian at: http://izvestia.ru/news/427048

⁶ ibid.

⁷ E. Shevardnadze: I have known Putin since he was almost a child. RBK. 3 October 2011. Available in Russian at: http://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/10/2011/5703ecf0a7947763d38e63

structure of international relations, as conveyed in Putin’s famous ‘Munich Speech’ of 2007. This could have accounted for Russia’s harsh reaction of banning Georgian wine and launching the anti-Georgian campaign as these measures were likely to be perceived by Russia as a response to NATO and the EU, the potential expansion of which had ignored Russia’s interests in terms of its military and economic security. Georgia was not the only country affected by Russia’s harsh style of bilateral relations. Moldova, Ukraine (with the so-called ‘gas conflict’ of 2005–2006) and Belarus (in 2007) were also targets of strict Russian policy (the gas tariff for Georgia was also raised in 2005). In general, Russia has aimed at liberalizing economic relations in the post-Soviet space. In the Russian foreign policy review for 2006, the authors provided the following explanation for the rise in the price of energy: ‘the transition to market-based economic relations with CIS countries is long overdue. ‘Favouritism’ in respect to relations with particular partners not only contradicts commonly accepted international practice, but also distorts processes of their internal development, deters systemic reformation of their economies and does not accommodate our aspiration to join the WTO. In addition, Russia is ready to consider potential scenarios for a progressive transition to new energy prices. Our goal is to prevent the politicization of economic partnership and distortion of our relations. Survey findings suggest that this goal corresponds with the expectations of the Russian public. Previous prices were politically conditioned, which did not bring any benefits to the provider or consumer countries. We are talking about the most crucial element of mutual emancipation, allowing the removal off all past vestiges and building pragmatic relations based on future aspirations as well as mutual respect and benefit.’


Since the change of authorities in Georgia in 2012, relations between Russia and Georgia have been heading towards normalization, albeit without crossing the ‘red line’ – the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, intact. Russian officials and experts have routinely used the term ‘normalization’ with respect to the country’s relations with Georgia. Interestingly, the term had emerged a few months before the conflict erupted. In April 2008, Vladimir Putin, during the final days of his presidency, stated that the normalization of relations with Georgia should be continued. More specifically, Putin gave directives for the resumption of postal service and transport communication. In addition, Putin also ordered preparation for the abolition of visa restrictions, acceleration of the process of the reconstruction of the Upper Larsi border crossing and the launch of consultations with experts on the admissibility of Georgian produce on the Russian market.

The question on visa-free movement for Georgian citizens travelling to the Russian Federation was raised again in December 2016 during a major press-conference when Vladimir Putin stated: ‘...at the end of the day, we should, of course, think about normalization, and I do not exclude the possibility of restoring visa-free entry for Georgian citizens to Russia. I think that there are sufficient conditions for this, even more so now that we have been receiving certain signals from some government structures of Georgia. It is of the utmost importance to establish normal relations between our special services and law enforcement agencies in order to fight against terrorism together and so that under no circumstances shall the visa-free regime compromise our security in this very fight against terrorism. I believe that this is absolutely feasible.’ In his speech, the Russian President also talked about different topics and the normalization of Russia’s relations with Turkey, Ukraine and the U.S. At its current stage of development, it is important that Russia demonstrates its readiness for normalized relations with partners that have been undergoing serious crises.

An important milestone in the normalization of relations was the Abashidze–Karasin format created after the Georgian Dream coalition won the parliamentary elections in October 2012. The victory of an opposition coalition in Georgia had provoked very positive reactions from Russian political analysts,4 while Vladimir Putin in December 2012 confirmed that regardless of the rigidity of the parties on revising their positions on South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it was still possible to expect some improvement: ‘We, in fact, very much want normalized relations with Georgia. However, it is obvious that Georgia is more interested in economic relations than Russia, but we will not be so arrogant as to say that we do not need it. No. We believe that relations between our two very close peoples have to be normalized and we need to strive for this. So far, I do not have an answer as to how we can overcome the challenges to our relations. However, as long as there are people who are ready to sort this out professionally, let us think over this together.’

In a section on bilateral relations on the website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia’s relations with Georgia are highlighted in a separate paragraph, together with relations with the U.S., EU, NATO, China, India and Turkey. More specifically, the section indicates that ‘Russia continues to look forward to developing good neighbourly relations with Georgia and the Georgian people. There will be no hindrance from our side and the degree of normalization will fully depend on the political will and realism coming from Tbilisi’. Thus, Moscow points out that relations are indeed in a deadlock,
however, Russia is ready for a positive dialogue if in Tbilisi there is a political will to do it. In this sense, Russia is somewhat passing the responsibility for the state of bilateral relations to Tbilisi.

By the next Georgian elections in October 2016, Russia had already experienced some constructive relations with Georgian Dream. On the eve of the elections, the Russian expert Nikolai Silaev formulated the following characterization of the relationship between the two countries: ‘what is good about Georgian Dream is that it is predictable. For the first time since 1991, we have Georgian partners who do not push us into scandals on a weekly basis. Indeed, there are individuals, including the former defence minister Tinatin Khidasheli who resigned on 1 August, and who expressed herself to the extent that even the Russian deputy minister of foreign affairs, Grigori Karasin, known for his composure, decided to step in. However, these individuals do not represent the core of Georgian politics, unlike in Saakashvili’s office’. 1

Russia did not stop talking about normalization, even when it was preparing for agreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2014: Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, did not see any inconsistencies in doing so. 2

An important factor in the normalization of relations was, according to some experts, the “disconnection” of Georgia from Ukraine in the Russian public consciousness, mainly due to the balanced position of the Georgian authorities on the Ukrainian crisis. 3 A bonus of some sorts from the normalization of relations with Georgia might be the demonstration effect: If Russia manages to rebuild contacts during a crisis, other countries, also having political conflicts with Russia, will no longer be able to use the argument that Russia is unable to find a common language with anybody. 4 At the same time, in spite of the potential for the normalization, the prognosis can also be gloomy. If relations are to be improved, this can only happen against the backdrop of the long-term settlement of the crisis between Russia and the West, as after having patched up the relations with Georgia, Russia can no longer stick to a harsh position towards Ukraine.

FORECAST FOR THE RELATIVELY LONGER TERM NORMALISATION

Overall, the following forecast can be made based on an analysis of the current course of normalization in relations between the two countries:

1) The restoration of diplomatic relations is not likely to come with a change of the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The two countries will probably sign a document to cement their differences with respect to the status quo.

2) Initially, a decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia had been shaped by the need for ensuring their security and protecting them from military invasion. The same necessity for protection served as grounds for signing the agreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2015. In this respect, if Russia is assured of guarantees of the security of the two republics, Moscow may declare that, if South Ossetia and Abkhazia make a sovereign decision to join Georgia, it will accept such a decision as it will be a decision made by independent countries to join the other state. In fact, this is the course that the Crimean scenario took (a declaration of independence followed by joining another state). It is worth remembering that in 2015, Vladimir Putin indicated that reintegration with Georgia was a possibility: ‘As for the territorial integrity of Georgia, it is up to the Georgian people, South Ossetians and the Abkhaz. It is necessary to work with them. We will accept any solution’. 5

3) At the same time, Russia’s position towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia is affected by its position towards the reunification with Crimea and the Ukrainian crisis in general. If Moscow decides to give the green light to the reintegreation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia with Georgia based on the political will of the latter, this will undermine Russia’s position towards Crimea from the perspective of the West, because it will see that Moscow may abandon some of its decisions, which were previously proclaimed as final. In this respect, it seems that one should not expect any progress before the conflict around Crimea is resolved. At the same time, the resolution of the conflict is not viewed in the context of Russian-Ukrainian relations, but rather in light of the Russian-Western relationship. Otherwise, Russia may launch negotiations with the West, tying its own concessions regarding South Ossetia and Abkhazia with the West’s recognition of the reunification with Crimea. Thus, this would be a part of a broader ‘trade-off’.

4) Russia’s lifting of the visa regime will not necessarily be tied up with the restoration of diplomatic relations. Overall, for the past few years there has been a trend towards the normalization of relations in the economy and interactions at the social level. Therefore, visa-free movement may come to be in the short- or medium-term. The abolishment of the visa regime will likely come with specific anti-terrorism measures undertaken by Georgia, and with deep cooperation on an anti-terrorism issues between the two countries.

5) The potential change of authorities in Russia after the presidential elections of 2018 or 2024 will not affect the official position towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia, similarly to the situation in Georgia when the accession of Georgian Dream to power did not entail the change of the country’s position towards the two republics.

6) Georgia’s potential ascension to NATO will result in Russia taking on a harsher tone and, in the best-case scenario, delaying the settlement of the dispute around the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to the unforeseeable future. The polit-
ical conflict between Russia and NATO is highly unlikely to be resolved in the long-term perspective to the extent that would allow Russia to employ a neutral position towards NATO enlargement to its bordering states.

7) Georgia’s potential ascension to the EU will not bring about as harsh of a response from Moscow as it would in the case of NATO. However, Russia’s willingness to build a constructive partnership in the field of the economy may fade away and visa-free movement (if it is restored by that time) will be revoked. Again, the matter in question largely depends on the extent of progress achieved by Russia and the EU: if the political crisis is settled, Western sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions revoked, visa-free regime introduced between Russia and the EU, then Georgia’s potential accession to EU will not derail bilateral relations between the two countries.

CONCLUSION

From a sociological perspective, 25 years makes up one generation. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, people who never lived in the USSR have taken up their professional careers. Russia’s political elites and academics consist of those whose professional careers originated before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Likewise, people with Soviet experience still work in Georgia’s political and academic communities. However, since the end of the Saakashvili period representatives of younger generations have considerably outnumbered those whose work records go back to Soviet times. In some respects, this is a unique situation for the post-Soviet space where most of the political elites still remember the Soviet Union. An analysis of the development of the early foreign policies of both Russia and Georgia can be undertaken from this very perspective: in the first years, many decisions were made either in opposition to the past or as a subconscious attempt to copy past experiences. At the same time, the generation that did not live through the tough 1990s and transition period has grown up and therefore, a historic review of the recent past is of great importance.

25 years is too short a term for state-building. At the same time, the societies in both countries have had to adjust to new realities and undergo numerous changes during these 25 years, which has been more active in terms of power changes from Gamsakhurdia to Shevardnadze, Saakashvili and the Georgian Dream. From this perspective, the Russian elites seem more conservative and stable. However, one should not forget the political landscape of Russia at the beginning of the 1990s when various interest groups and state institutions pushed conflicting approaches to Russia’s foreign policy, a situation which did not support regional peace and security.

If you take a person’s life, active self-identification in personal and professional spheres takes places after 20 years. This is what happened to both of our countries: Georgia made a U-turn in 2003 with Russia following bit later in 2006-2007. In addition, for both countries the opinion of the West was important to understand their priorities and goals: after the fascination of the early 1990s, the West has become Russia’s significant ‘Other’, while Georgia, having made the decision to make Russia its significant ‘Other’, continues to undertake efforts to become part of the West.

An observation over a long period and assessment of the findings allows for a deep analysis of foreign policy decisions with both domestic factors and the international context playing important roles. Certain decisions are often attributed to mean intentions, while in fact, such decisions were shaped by the logic of internal political processes aiming to consolidate the public and preserve sovereignty.