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## THE BASIS FOR RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN DIALOGUE



**Russian-Georgian relations have been deadlocked despite the nominal growth of trade and tourism from Russia and certain progress in the talks on the cargo transit via Abkhazia. Solutions to the problems that hinder bilateral relations can only be found in a new context based on new ideas. But first Russia and Georgia should decide if they need to improve their relations.**

To answer this question, we should analyze the constant or invariable conditions for Russian-Georgian relations.

First, their security is interdependent. Given the connection between the North Caucasus republics and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the security of one party can only be enhanced to the detriment of the other party. This problem was further complicated after the 2008 war.

Second, differences between Russia and the West over European security are an objective reality. Georgia stands at the forefront of this confrontation and hence has to choose between Russia and the West. Georgia's striving to join NATO and the EU is its sovereign choice. But since the security of Russia and Georgia is interconnected, this choice will damage Russia's security. This makes Georgia a hostage of Russia-NATO confrontation and can tempt Tbilisi to make use of this situation. The previous Georgian governments believed that the stronger the Western pressure on Russia the better it is for Georgia's national interests.

Third, there is an obvious asymmetry of interests not just of Russia and Georgia, but also of Georgia and the West. The Georgian elite groups have seen that Western support has its limits and often does not go further than good intentions. Georgia as a small country in the South Caucasus is unlikely to have the same strong influence in NATO and the EU it once had on the Soviet Union. Georgia will have to address its problems on its own.

As a result, the Georgian political class is facing a difficult choice at a time when the price of mistakes is exceedingly high. The situation is verging on the dramatic, because the Georgian elites have not proved to be good strategists but have made every conceivable mistake since the country gained its independence.

Throughout its independence period, Georgia has been trying to settle the key problem of territorial integrity in three ways without involving Russia or by picking a fight with it. The first was the way of nationalism, which caused the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia during the Soviet Union's disintegration. Next it relied on foreign – US – military assistance. Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in Georgia when the US was ruled by the neoconservatives, who were unscrupulous but very energetic. Saakashvili tried to involve the US in a war against Russia in Georgia. Washington evaded a direct confrontation, but the Georgian leader put it in a position where the US had to cover for his mistakes. The romantic version according to which the 2008 war was waged to protect Georgia from a Russian aggression, which the Georgian leaders put forward, does not really explain why Russia has recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By using armed force, Saakashvili forced Russia's hand. By refusing to discuss a new status for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he forced Moscow to ensure their independence in the only legal way possible: by recognizing their independence and signing a security agreement with them. Based on the principles of a zero-sum game, this has had a negative effect on Georgia's security. The flirting with the US neocons seems to be over, but who can say confidently that the foreign policy experiments by the future US administrations will not revitalize Georgia's revenge-seeking aspirations?

Currently we are witnessing Georgia's third attempt to settle the problem of its territorial integrity. Georgia is implementing the idea of a normative liberal empire, according to which Russia is a hopelessly obsolete country on the wrong side of history, which is trying to hinder Georgia's progress. It is believed that Georgia is pursuing a policy of "strategic patience" toward Russia in the interests of the Western community. Georgia's readiness for dialogue with Russia is being presented as a favor to Moscow and a sacrifice – hopefully, repayable – to the Western interests.

When all the previous methods have failed, it would be logical to take the so far untrodden path of pragmatism. What would happen if Georgia stopped sidestepping Russia or acting against it and started cooperating with it, without forgetting about its own interests?

It is from this position that we should consider the three key issues in Russian-Georgian relations.

The key issue concerns security and should be addressed comprehensively, based on the assumption that Georgia has the right to strengthen its security, but not to the detriment of the security of Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Russia. Russian leaders have made many statements on this issue. Roughly speaking, Russia could act as the guarantor of a process in which neutral Georgia would make a series of acceptable proposals to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and do so until this breeds mutual trust and lays the foundation for a different vision of the three countries' shared future. Not that this will definitely produce a result Tbilisi expects, but this is the only right path. The others would take it in the wrong direction.

Second, Georgia should set out its attitude to the Russia-West confrontation



unambiguously and avoid any involvement in it. It could draw on the experience of neutral Finland, which also stands at the forefront of the Russia-West confrontation.

And lastly, Georgia should act independently amid the asymmetry of interests, rather than look for anyone who would pay for turning it into an anti-Russia bridgehead.

Tbilisi should get a clear view on its real interests and the best way of ensuring them. Pretending to do a favor for Russia and launching dialogue with it in order to receive benefits from the West would not do any good. It will only suspend Russian-Georgian relations in their current state. Our dialogue will only become constructive when the Georgian elite see the benefits of working consistently towards stable, predictable and friendly relations with Russia, as well as the inherent possibilities of this approach.

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