



Russia's view of Georgia A NATO proxy yet again?

Julie Wilhelmsen

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Russia's policies on Georgia must be understood in the context not only of broken diplomatic relations after the 2008 war and Russian support for the breakaway republics, but also of growing antagonism with NATO.
- Lack of bilateral diplomatic contact, and Russia's viewing Georgia in terms of its NATO engagement is a risky combination. The two neighbours should be encouraged to re-establish bilateral diplomatic relations .
- Engagement in multilateral institutions where Russia, Georgia and their Western partners meet (G8, OSCE, CoE, UN) should be reinvigorated, to ensure that Georgia does not become the site of a proxy war between Russia and NATO.
- By serving as the prime broker in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia has become more defining for Georgia, while multilateral regulation of conflict in the region is weakening. The incoming Biden US presidency has promised both to enhance multilateralism in global affairs and to strengthen NATO. Reinvigorating the former to address security issues in the Caucasus should be pursued.

Abstract

After the crises in Ukraine, and despite the Georgian government's allegedly more pragmatic attitude towards Russia, official statements from Moscow increasingly project Georgia as hostile. This may be the result of the Kremlin stepping up a propaganda campaign to put pressure on Georgia, but it is also linked to growing perceptions of Georgia as becoming an agent of NATO. Moreover, Russia's increasingly insistent rhetorical and practical support for the independent status of the two Georgian breakaway republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, is still framed with reference to Kosovo as a tit-for-tat in a conflict with the West. In parallel with this hardening in Russian views, there is hardly any diplomatic contact between Russia and Georgia. The regional multilateral frameworks have become dysfunctional, obstructed by polarization. Further Georgian NATO integration could entail an increasing risk of war, unless frank discussions and engagement with Russia can be promoted.

Background

With the Georgian Dream coalition coming to power in 2012, many observers expected a new rapprochement in Georgia's relations with Russia. After all, the extremely tense relations that peaked with the 2008 Russo–Georgian war had been largely conditioned on Moscow's view of the Saakashvili government, habitually referred to as 'criminal' in official Russian rhetoric. Moreover, the new Georgian government expressed intentions of pursuing a more pragmatic approach to Russia. There were early signs of re-establishing diplomatic contact and rebuilding practical collaboration – for example through the establishment of the bilateral Karasin–Abashidze dialogue meetings on issues of trade, transport and humanitarian contact.

However, since 2014, Russo–Georgian relations have again been moving backwards. Regardless of whether the recent policies of the Georgian Dream government have been more 'conciliatory' to Russia or not, it is Moscow's view of Georgian policies that will condition the Russian approach. The marked decline in official Russian attention to Georgia and the changing content of this attention indicate a reframing of Georgia as seen from Moscow – reflecting greater Russia–West rivalry (if not conflict) in the field of security. This policy brief is based on the analysis of 95 official Russian text mentioning Georgia from the years 2014 to 2019, downloaded in full from www.mid.ru and www.kremlin.ru.

Russia's changing view of Western engagement in Georgia

Russian perceptions of the West plunged after the crises in Ukraine in 2014. This initially shaped

Moscow's views of both the EU and NATO in Georgia, making Tbilisi's continued efforts at linking up with these institutions appear even more threatening than before. The EU was projected as one with NATO in pushing for zero-sum influence in Georgia at the expense of Russia – and even as deceitfully disguising this push as a win–win for Russia.

Such negative representations did not persist, however. While Russia cautioned about the consequences for Georgian–Russian economic ties of the June 2014 signing of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) between Georgia and the EU – it also stressed Georgia's right to choose for itself in such matters. Russia declared that it did not want to punish Georgia and would seek pragmatic solutions. Indeed, the steadily growing trade between Russia and Georgia shows that such a pragmatic approach has been pursued and is perceived as being in Russia's interest.

Moreover, 'sober-minded people' still existed in Europe and could constitute potential partners for Moscow, which '[continues to believe that the phased construction of a single economic and humanitarian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok with reliance on an architecture of equal and indivisible security should be such a natural goal.](#)'

The growing Russian preoccupation with 'equal and indivisible security' – referring to the principle that security for one party cannot be sought at the expense of another – can explain why Russia's views of NATO in Georgia have not followed the same trajectory as with the EU and Georgia. Official statements on NATO indicate growing unease about NATO expansion and the US presence and influence, as expressed also in Russian foreign policy discourse more generally in recent years. For example, the prospects of parts of a missile defence system being installed in Georgia discussed in 2014 were immediately framed as existential for Russia, eliciting harsh reactions. Such statements were re-tuned with each new NATO–Georgia military exercise from 2015 onward, in line with the growing scale of these exercises. While only 200 US troops took part in the first Noble Partner exercise, 1170 participated in the August 2018 exercise. Since 2018, Moscow statements on Georgia have been dominated by references to the ominous and growing US threat. Particularly noteworthy are the many complaints about a growing physical military US presence in Georgia – including allegations in 2018 that the Pentagon was establishing a secret laboratory close to Tbilisi to produce biological weapons and constructing a deep-water port in Anaklia, close to Sochi at the Black Sea coast.

According to Russian statements, the USA is not just pushing NATO closer to its borders, wanting

to include Ukraine and Georgia and constantly instigating ‘colour revolutions’ in the former Soviet space – it is also an unreliable and dangerous patron, a breaker of international law. Tbilisi is framed as a similar victim of US power as Ukraine: it will be misused, losing its independence to the USA. Simultaneously, Russia is portrayed as a reliable and trustworthy patron.

The preoccupation with the US/NATO threat has also increasingly framed Russia’s view of developments in the two breakaway republics Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They are consistently spoken of as fully independent and sovereign states, with no opening for changing this view of their status. Their independence is simply termed the ‘new’ or ‘modern’ reality which Georgia has failed to recognize. The bilateral treaties Russia signed with Abkhazia in 2014 and South Ossetia 2015 are seen as building full-fledged interstate relations with independent subjects of international law. Russian actions in these republics – violating Georgian airspace, emplacing barbed wire along the administrative borderline, building up Russian bases and border troops in Abkhazia – are presented as being in line with international practice and law. Importantly, the West still looms large in the changing Russian narrative of its own relations with the breakaway republics. The Western facilitation and legitimation of independent Kosovo is repeatedly cited as an analogy to Russia’s approach to these de jure Georgian entities: Russia is simply taking the responsibility to protect the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from a Georgia that has been led astray, that is becoming anti-Russian, and where NATO activity is increasing.

Georgia subsumed under a growing NATO threat

The initially positive Russian view of the Georgian Dream government faded with Georgia’s continued engagement with NATO. According to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [‘The new Georgian leadership is striving to build relations with Russia on a more pragmatic basis’ ... but ‘mysterious NATO training centres appear on the territory of Georgia, broadcast statements are made about the necessity of accelerating the country’s movement into NATO structures.’](#)

From 2015 NATO/ USA re-emerge as the key forces behind Georgia, working to destabilise and break peace in the region, as part of their strategy of containing Russia. In the Russian view, Georgia becomes more and more dangerous through its growing alliance, becoming the proxy of these subversive and dangerous entities.

Tbilisi has even been construed as an active agent of an allegedly broad, anti-Russian offensive underway in the Council of Europe (CoE), the International

Criminal Court (ICC), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN General Assembly as well as in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The opponents of normalization with Russia are allegedly becoming stronger. [Georgian president Salome Zurbishvili \(elected November 2018\) is represented as a puppet of the USA, whipping up anti-Russian attitudes in Georgia.](#) Also the Georgian media are allegedly turning anti-Russian, culminating in accusations of attacks on the Russian press during the June 2019 riots in Tbilisi.

From 2015 onward Georgia’s approach to negotiations and other issues concerning the breakaway republics is presented as hostile and anti-Russian, aimed at creating negative international resonance, sabotaging dialogue, and deliberately obstructing the Geneva International Discussions (GID) on the breakaway republics – the only legitimate format to deal with the consequences of the 2008 Russo–Georgian war, according to Moscow. This Georgian strategy is said to be propelled by the lack of international acceptance for the new status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and by Tbilisi’s desire to draw Georgia closer to NATO: [‘Tbilisi continues to speak of the “occupation” by Russia. This absurd thesis is used as an argument in favour of further rapprochement with NATO. Sadly, on this issue, the position of the current Georgian authorities is no different from that of the Saakashvili regime.’](#) In the Russian view, the Georgian Dream government has acquired a [‘militaristic’](#) mindset.

Polarization and opportunity for real encounter

Although Russia’s mounting war of words against Georgia has been highlighted here, Georgian accusations against Russia have also increased in recent years. This is exemplified in official Georgian speech by constantly referring to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as ‘occupied territories’, and allegations of a Russian information war against Georgia. For example, according to former president Giorgi Margvelashvili (2013–2018), ‘Georgia is one of the targets of Russia’s global ideological propaganda campaign. The essence of this campaign is to divert Georgia from the European and Euro-Atlantic choice through so-called soft power’ (Civil.ge, 31 March 2015.) Russian-initiated integration projects in the so-called near abroad, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, are described as thinly veiled efforts to spread Moscow’s own power. Some representatives in the Georgian government and most members of the parliament have been voicing this view of a growing Russian menace. The various complaints against Russia initiated or upheld by Georgia in the CoE, ICC and UN fora testify to this development.

As a consequence of rising mutual hostile attitudes, the multilateral institutions in which

Russia, Georgia and Western countries meet seem to be instrumentalized as a stage for waging accusations and conflict, instead of serving as arenas for real encounter, with open exchange of views, compromise and cooperation. This applies also to the OSCE and CoE, two institutions previously often accorded significance and trust in Russian official statements: the OSCE because it has codified the principle that the security of one state should not be enhanced at the expense of the security of others; the CoE because it treats Europe as a single legal space. Russian insistence on Abkhazia and South Ossetia being independent states, and the refusal by other OSCE states to recognize this status, is used as leverage to block OSCE observer missions in the breakaway republics. The OSCE is now seen as a legitimate actor only if it is protected from ‘anti-Russian’ actors and discourse. The Council of Europe is increasingly construed as a biased institution where Georgia, assisted by its ‘Western patrons’, is seeking to harm Russia as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Growing polarization also seems to have obstructed the Geneva International Discussions on the consequences of the 2008 war, which remain the only platform for all relevant actors to discuss security-related issues and humanitarian needs. [In 2019, the entrenched positions even became manifest in deteriorating relations on the ground, with increasing numbers of incidents, including detentions at crossing points.](#)

Parallel to this impasse in multilateral institutions, there has been no bilateral diplomatic contact between Georgia and Russia on the top political level since 2008, apart from a brief meeting between the Foreign Ministers in August 2019, which quickly turned very controversial; on the mid-level the interests of Russia in Georgia and Georgia in Russia have been represented through sections in the Swiss Embassy. Diplomatic contacts between Russia and

NATO were broken off in 2014, and meetings in the NATO–Russia Council are still limited and produce few results. Meanwhile, the Meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs in November 2020 was framed with reference to a ‘persistently aggressive Russia’ and a ‘Russian military build-up around the Alliance’. Ukraine and Georgia were invited for a special session to support them as [‘valued partners’](#)

Future openings?

While the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have added yet another layer to deteriorating relations, the recent armistice negotiated in Nagorno-Karabakh could provide fresh opportunities for diplomacy in the region. Moscow’s central role in the process, as well as the outcome, indicates that Armenia has come more clearly under Russian patronage, and Russia has gained a military foothold which could be there to stay. However, Russia seems to be adjusting in the post-Soviet space: trying to achieve a balance among all the parties and applying a more sophisticated mix of soft and hard politics. Moscow has also indicated openness to revert to a broader multinational format, including that of the OSCE Minsk Group, in the process ahead.

On the Georgian side, an ‘accommodationist’ position has emerged in the broader public debate, advocating a more pragmatic and rational approach to Russia, with an emphasis on improving economic and diplomatic relations. Given the polarized debate on Russia in Georgia, this position might easily be dismissed as constituting a naïve and dangerous ‘pro-Russian’ line: however, it could create grounds for a certain rapprochement. Georgia’s willingness to approve Russian overflights in establishing the peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh could be viewed as one step in this direction. Enhanced practical collaboration with Russia might well help to ease today’s strained political relations.

Julie Wilhelmsen is a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). She holds a PhD in Political Science and conducts research in the fields of critical security studies, Russian foreign and security policies and the radicalization of Islam in Eurasia. Wilhelmsen has been editor of the journal *Internasjonal Politikk*, and was a member of the Norwegian Government Expert Group for the Defense of Norway.

 **Norwegian Institute
of International
Affairs**

NUPI
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
C.J. Hambros plass 2D
PB 7024 St. Olavs Plass, 0130 Oslo, Norway
www.nupi.no | post@nupi.no

Established in 1959, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading independent research institute on international politics and areas of relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. Formally under the Ministry of Education and Research, NUPI nevertheless operates as an independent, non-political instance in all its professional activities. Research undertaken at NUPI ranges from short-term applied research to more long-term basic research.

Cover: Georgian president Salomé Zourabichvili and Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg.

Photo: NTB/Scanpix

