

# GEORGIAN FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE AUGUST 2008 WAR

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## Abstract

The Military Conflict that widely known as *South Ossetia War* in the literature and which turned to a short term regional war but with important results, had been harmful for Georgia from various aspects. Besides economy, social life, domestic politics etc., Russia's intervention and defeat of Tbilisi revealed doubts over Georgia's West oriented foreign policy since 2004. Within this work, foreign policy followed by Saakashvili government since 2008 is investigated both regional and global dimensions. Within this context, besides the issues like US foreign policy towards the region and Georgia's relations with its first and second circle neighbours, the domestic political dynamics were included in the research subjects as well.

**Keywords:** *Georgia, Caucasus, 2008 War, South Ossetia, Abkhazia*

## Özet

Literatürde Güney Osetya Savaşı olarak da bilinen, Ağustos 2008'de Gürcistan ve Rusya Federasyonu arasında bir bölgesel savaşa dönüşen kısa süreli ancak önemli sonuçları olan askeri çatışma, Gürcistan için çeşitli açılardan tahrip edici olmuştur. Ekonomi, sosyal hayat, iç politika vb. yanında Rusya'nın müdahalesi ve Tiflis'in mağlubiyeti, Gürcistan'ın 2004'ten itibaren izlediği Batı yönelimli dış politikanın seyrine ilişkin de şüpheler ortaya çıkarmıştır. Çalışmada, Saakaşvili yönetiminin 2008 sonrasında izlediği dış politika, bölgesel ve küresel ölçekte incelenmektedir. Bu bağlamda, ABD'nin bölgede izlediği siyaset, Gürcistan'ın birinci ve ikinci halka komşuları ile ilişkileri yanında, Gürcistan'daki iç siyasal dinamikler de araştırma konularına dahil edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Gürcistan, Kafkaslar, 2008 Savaşı, Güney Osetya, Abhazya*

## Introduction

Caucasus has been a focal region in front of the world political agenda especially in the post 1990 circumstances. Moscow centered political and eco-

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conomic system has collapsed but this did not mean an inevitable consequence of a new regional order. Today's frozen conflicts arose and fluctuated first and intensely in this region. Georgia with its political instability and ethnically volatile map had been an important geopolitical laboratory for those characteristics of Caucasus problems. Although the Azerbaijanis and Armenians are the first two big minorities of the country, Tbilisi faced two separatist wars with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Adjara problem became another issue; not significant because of the ethnic demands but regional/leadership autonomy survival namely Abashidze case.

Eduard Shevardnadze who had been the second President of the independent Georgia was an experienced former Soviet political figure who looked for a balance between the powers that possess a real force in the game: Russia, US, Turkey etc. Although he did lose two regions neither from *de facto* nor from legal aspects, he could not solve those problems totally as well. His political weakness and economic conditions paved the way for so called "velvet revolution" that brought Mikheil Saakashvili rule.

Two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union were the period that Russia lost its former influence in the region. By 2000's beginning with re-emplacment in Chechen scene, Vladimir Putin's Russia again became a power never to be neglected. With the capabilities gained from energy game, Russian leadership's perception in the middle and late 2000s that the time was ripe for a rewriting of the post-Cold War rules in European and Eurasian politics, rules which the government of Putin believed had severely disadvantaged Russia and been dictated to it at a moment of weakness. Georgia's aspiration to join NATO was, in Moscow's view, an unacceptable flouting of Russia's claim to a privileged sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region.

Georgia does not have rich energy resources but has a key position for energy rivalry in the region. Energy dimension is a very inter-connected matter with regional influence race. Georgia's foreign policy has gained significance mostly because of its geopolitical situation since the post-Soviet area became a chessboard for energy games. Georgia is currently the only significant route for piping oil and gas from the Caspian to world markets that circumvents Russia. Its location makes it an important transit country for oil and gas, with 1.4 per cent of the world's oil production (1.2 million b/d) flowing through Georgia. Oil from Azerbaijan is carried along both the BTC and the Baku-Supsa pipelines, and by railcars to Georgian ports. The BTE pipeline, which carries gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey and beyond, also passes through Georgia.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Truscott, "The Fourth Energy Corridor: The Three Phases of Nabucco", *Whitehall Papers*, 73:1, 2009, 32-46, p.36



### **Was it more than a War?**

With the Georgian-Russian war in August 2008 and Russia's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Caucasus has been more internationally problematic. The War generated new sources of instability by inflating foreign policy agendas of the major external actors both from and outside region. Russia made it clear to the international community that it has its own claims to the South Caucasus those can extend towards military confrontation.<sup>2</sup> The war exposed the West's inability to prevent Russia from moving aggressively to restore its primacy over the former Soviet territory.

The August 2008 War caught most of the world by surprise. Not only did Russia and Georgia go to war over tiny South Ossetia, but Russia also recognized that region as an independent and sovereign state. According to the International Crisis Group reports on two conflict regions; until then, South Ossetia had not seemed a priority issue for either the Georgian or Russian governments, as it possessed neither Abkhazia's strategic Black Sea coastline nor its economic attraction.<sup>3</sup> Today's those breakaway regions are not to be evaluated just through a geographical dimension. The first clear consequence of the War has been a question mark on the power of the so called coloured revolutions and the expectation for a *spill over*. Georgia was the first to be the win of those revolutions. So, an expectation had occurred in the region in favor of pro-Western movements inspired by the change in Tbilisi. Although it has older national, ethnic, social and geopolitical roots, the Orange Revolution of Ukraine followed Georgia.

Mikheil Saakashvili convenient with his role as a successful post-Soviet leader with a Western university education, in his numerous passionate speeches and interviews, advocated Western democratic values, human rights and the market economy. But it is important to note that in contrast to his speeches for Western audiences, his public appearances in Georgia, especially after the Rose Revolution, were aggressive and disrespectful toward his own citizens. Official statements by the Georgian leadership regarding Georgia's desire to join NATO and the EU, Georgian military groups' participation in the anti-terrorist coalition in Iraq and peacekeeping forces in Kosovo and Afghanistan were considered proof of the post-revolutionary government's pro-Western orientation. However, the first military missions to Kosovo and Iraq were dispatched before the revolu-

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<sup>2</sup> Nona Mikhelidze, "After the 2008 Russia-Georgia War: Implications for the Wider Caucasus", *The International Spectator*, Vol.44, No.3, September 2009, 27-42, p.27.

<sup>3</sup> *Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia*, International Crisis Group Europe Report No. 193, 5 June 2008. *South Ossetia: The Burden of Recognition*, International Crisis Group, Europe Report No. 205, 7 June 2010.

tion, so the new government's pro-Western stance is nothing new.<sup>4</sup> The West appreciated President Saakashvili's anti-Russian rhetoric, which was directed at Russia's top political leadership.

In the post-war period, the focus in Georgia remains on damage assessment, foreign aid and rehabilitation. However as the post-war shock ebbs, Georgia's mishandling of the situation in the run-up to the war has become the subject of intense discussion, with growing sectors of the public questioning how and why Saakashvili allowed himself to be drawn into a war that he could never win.<sup>5</sup>

Many questions have been posed in public sphere about the Georgia's policy around the War. Most of them were concentrated around two basic circles: First who first caused the War? Second why and how the West did not support Georgia in a level clear to be understood by Moscow?

### **On the other side: Uncertain future of the breakaway republics**

In fact, three years after the War that started the independence adventure of South Ossetia; this small country lacks even true political, economic or military autonomy. Moscow staffs over half the government, donates 99 per cent of the budget and provides security. South Ossetians themselves often urge integration into the Russian Federation, and their entity's situation closely mirrors that of Russia's North Caucasus republics.<sup>6</sup>

The recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia has been far from being a final solution from many aspects. The decision was not only a regional geopolitical choice but also stemmed from a global preference over political and legal paradigm. Though Moscow had insisted since early 2008 that the recognition of Kosovo by the U.S. and many EU member states created a precedent with serious implications for a number of conflicts, the decision seemed poorly thought out and impulsive. Within some special interviews Russian diplomats and analysts told to be question the wisdom of an action that not only damaged Russia's international image but could also potentially spur secessionist sentiment in the North Caucasus. Even those who considered recognition necessary to protect the ethnic Ossetians' rights are sceptical about the entity's development potential. Furthermore in South Ossetian domestic politics, unification with North Ossetia is another debate issue because of inevitable future loss of declared independence. From Russian perspective, backing the unification demands is not acceptable because of two reasons: first that will mean to assume that the 2008

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<sup>4</sup> Vladimer Papava, "Georgia's economy: Post-revolutionary Development and Post-war Difficulties", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.28. No.2, 199-213, p.205.

<sup>5</sup> Nona Mikhelidze, *Ibid*, p.28.

<sup>6</sup> *South Ossetia: The Burden of Recognition*, International Crisis Group, Europe Report No. 205, 7 June 2010, p.i.

War not a result of humanitarian intervention, second if a unified Ossetia becomes under a kind of independence, ironically such an acceptance will mean the first territory loss of Moscow since 1991.

The Russian President has signed friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance treaties with both of Georgia's breakaway regions, pledging to protect the two republics' borders in return for the right to establish military bases on their territories. Moscow is now set to keep 7,600 soldiers in these regions, more than twice the number present before the war.<sup>7</sup>

### **Impact on Domestic Politics**

According to the 2008 State Department report on Georgia, since 2007 the respect for freedom of speech, the press and assembly has worsened; public broadcasting has become friendlier to the government and political debate about ongoing events is lacking; ratings on political rights have also declined.<sup>8</sup>

The Rose Revolution was the outcome of the Georgian people's desire for a more democratic society, the reduction of corruption and improvement in the national economy and social conditions. However, within 5 years of the Rose Revolution, as Vladimer Papava puts, quite naturally, the euphoria that followed it, both inside and outside the country, diminished. It has been replaced by a more sober assessment and a more realistic evaluation of the results of post-revolutionary change.<sup>9</sup>

The war, elevated the interest towards this small Caucasian state onto the world stage also from the aspect of democracy and domestic politics. The opposition has called for early parliamentary and presidential elections. Even if there is no competitive opposition in Georgia yet, some newly created alliances may be able to mobilise public opinion against Saakashvili. One such group is the alliance between the Republicans and the New Rights Party led by former Georgian ambassador to the UN Irakli Alasania. Alasania is a pro-Western politician who emphasizes the importance of Georgia's ambition to integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions, while recognising that it is essential to achieve peace with Russia through "pragmatic and principled diplomatic steps".<sup>10</sup>

One of the indirect outcomes of the August war has been the consolidation (although conditional and temporary) of the opposition parties in Georgia, which spoke with one voice against the government. They also launched a series of long and powerful protests in April-May 2009 focusing

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<sup>7</sup> Nona Mikhelidze, *Ibid*, p.29.

<sup>8</sup> "News Media Feel Limits to Georgia's Democracy", *The New York Times*, 7 October 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com>. Nona Mikhelidze, *Ibid*, p.28.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimer Papava, *Ibid*, p.199.

<sup>10</sup> Nona Mikhelidze, *Ibid*, p.29.

on two important dates, 9 April and 26 May. However, despite mobilising large-scale protests against the government, the opposition parties could neither demonstrate their unity nor offer a credible, alternative political platform.<sup>11</sup> After the rose revolution the future of Georgian democracy had begun to be observed both from and abroad the region. Despite many changes in administrative structure and economic order, Georgia's experience shows that a pro-Western and anti-Russian orientation is by no means an adequate guarantee of democracy.

In view of the ongoing global financial crisis, Georgia also faces new economic problems after the August war, including the reconstruction of damaged military and civilian infrastructure and new challenges to the peace processes.<sup>12</sup> The inflow of foreign direct investments to Georgia has dropped significantly. Investors try to invest in relatively safe countries rather than ones such as Georgia, which was seriously affected by the Russian aggression. In addition, the global financial crisis drove Georgians living abroad to reduce their remittances to their relatives living in Georgia. The country's huge foreign trade imbalance must be added to this mix. Imports exceed exports by four times, so it came as no surprise that the stability of the lari exchange rate was shattered.<sup>13</sup>

The power circles in the country have been changing drastically for 8 years since the overthrow of the Shevardnadze. After the Georgian–Russian conflict in August 2008, Patriarch Ilya which represents a growing mysterious personally intervened and claimed to believe in peaceful resolution of the conflict. During his visit to Moscow in December 2008, when he attended the funeral of the Patriarch Alexei of Russia, he met the Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. At that time President Saakashvili welcomed the efforts of the Church of Georgia to build channels of communication with Moscow as 'a public diplomacy mission', but also said that he had met the Patriarch before the latter's departure to Moscow and discussed with him a message to be conveyed to the Russian President. The Patriarch, according to the President, was going to make a clear statement that 'not a single Georgian will ever be reconciled with the occupation of Georgian regions or the capture of Georgian lands'. On his arrival back home, the Patriarch urged the Georgian people to dialogue with Russia. 'The Russian President is in favour of the return of refugees and this is a very good sign. He is also in favour of the opening of borders and the functioning of embassies. There were arrangements in almost all issues and I think our authorities should use our visit there and continue this course. I think that it will bring good

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<sup>11</sup> Tamara Grdzeldze, *The Orthodox Church of Georgia: Challenges Under Democracy and Freedom (1990–2009)*, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, Vol. 10, No. 2–3, May–August 2010, 160–175, p.163

<sup>12</sup> Nona Mikhelidze, *Ibid*, p.29.

<sup>13</sup> Vladimer Papava, *Ibid*, p.208.

results.' Georgia's foreign minister commented positively on the importance of the Patriarch's diplomacy.<sup>14</sup>

### **Western attitude and Georgia's Post-War Orientation**

The West considered Russia's military action as "unacceptable" and criticised the Kremlin for using disproportionate force during the conflict; it condemned Russia's decision to recognise the independence of Georgia's secessionist regions and called for peaceful solution of the conflicts. However, the EU avoided sanctions towards Moscow.<sup>15</sup> The EU found itself at a loss, with a weakened stance in its eastern neighbourhood and thus weakened access to Central Asian natural resources, reducing its ambitions to secure energy diversification and reduce its energy dependence on Russia.

After the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, Brussels offered Tbilisi negotiations on a free trade agreement. The proposed transition to a free trade regime with the EU is a very important factor for encouraging the continued flow of foreign investments into Georgia. Negotiations on this issue between the US and Georgia are still at an embryonic stage, but the EU decided at an Extraordinary European Council meeting in Brussels on 1 September 2008 (CEU 2008), that such an agreement should go ahead, provided that Georgia meets economic conditions set by Brussels within the format of the EU Neighbourhood Policy. These include the adoption of a new labour code, which would secure the same rights for employees as in the EU itself and the creation of a European-style anti-monopoly and consumer rights protective legislation. A new EU Eastern Partnership Plan, unveiled on 3 December 2008 in Brussels (CEC 2008), proposed further generous financial assistance programmes and free trade deals to Georgia and four other former Soviet states.<sup>16</sup>

### **Prospects for Neighbours under vital security interests**

The more important indicator for Georgia's political integration to the West is NATO membership. Many find the roots of Russian decision to attack Georgia in 2008 Bucharest Summit where Georgia and Ukraine could not achieve the plan they expected. NATO countries disagreed on a range of issues concerning the alliance's relations with Georgia, and in particular, on the question of Georgian accession to NATO. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, a number of European countries (such as the UK and most Central and Eastern European states) supported offering a MAP (membership action plan) to both Georgia and Ukraine. Opposition to the MAP pro-

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<sup>14</sup> Tamara Grdzeldze, *Ibid*, p.168.

<sup>15</sup> Nona Mikhelidze, *Ibid*, p.37.

<sup>16</sup> Vladimer Papava, *Ibid*, p.209.



posal (and in general to firmer support for Georgia in its conflict with Russia) was led by Germany, whose government was concerned to preserve its close business and political relations with the Kremlin.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Ukraine-Armenia-Azerbaijan***

Analysis concerning the military balance in the region has been changing by sudden important political developments. In this manner, from Russia's perspective the Black Sea area is still critical for the Russian naval force, allowing it to expand its influence into the Mediterranean. The importance of the Abkhaz coast increased further after it became clear that the Ukraine does not intend to prolong the permission for Russian naval forces to stay in Sevastopol before overthrow of the Orange movement in 2010. But with the Yanukovich presidency, soon after his election, Russia agreed to a 30 percent drop in the price of natural gas sold to Ukraine, in exchange for permission to extend Russia's lease of a major naval base in the Black Sea port of Sevastopol, Ukraine, for 25 years.<sup>18</sup> That means a dominant Russian navy presence in north Black Sea coast till the mid 21<sup>st</sup> Century

During the August war, Yerevan also maintained its neutrality, even though damage from the war amounted to over \$670 million. The losses would have been even greater had Armenia not maintained "constructive relations" with Georgia, as Armenia's prime minister called them. Armenia is highly dependent on Georgia in so far as Georgian ports represent Armenia's main thoroughfares for foreign trade (approximately 70 percent of Armenian trade transits via Georgia). After the war, Yerevan appears to have recognised its need for economic Access to Western markets and thus the normalisation of relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan has become the priority of Serz Sargsyan's foreign policy.<sup>19</sup>

After the war some observers in and outside the region speculated on Javakheti issue. Those were evaluations on possible usage of the Armenian populated region to the detriment of Georgia by Moscow for further destabilization. The August 2008 war with Russia substantially heightened the sense of insecurity in Georgia, and the feeling that Moscow's main intent was not only to reverse its European-Atlantic orientation and cause it to adopt a more supportive foreign policy, but also the break-up of the country if that policy remained unchanged. As Moscow's leverage over Georgia de-

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p.119-120. Asmus even asserts the existence of a 'pro-Russian lobby in German politics' that is centred on (but not limited to) the Social Democratic Party.

<sup>18</sup> "Russia, Ukraine agree on naval-base-for-gas deal" 21April 2010, By Ivan Watson and Maxim Tkachenko, *CNN*. "Deal Struck on Gas, Black Sea Fleet", 22 April 2010, By Anatoly Medetsky, *The Moscow Times*.

<sup>19</sup> Nona Mikhelidze, *Ibid*, p.34.

creased after it recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thereby losing its ability to dangle a settlement over those breakaway regions as inducements, many in Georgia feared that it could try to incite instability through Javakheti.<sup>20</sup> The Armenian issue in Georgia is thus not only important for relations with Yerevan but also with Moscow. It is important to note that a milestone between these three states had been the withdrawal of the Russian base in Akhalkalaki (Ahılkelek) in 2007. That was a year before the war.

Georgia-Armenia relations is quite critical for the region because Yerevan is the most clear ally of Moscow in the region but Georgia did not give up its relations with Armenia firstly not to be sandwiched between two countries. Economic factors are also connected to this situation. However, the most sensitive point is still to be Javakheti issue. The Javakheti issue came into public interest once again with the Wikileaks scandal. As the documents release, this problem is important for US from many aspects as well. Ordway, then US Ambassador to Yerevan reports after his participation in a Dashnak anniversary that “The most unexpected part of Margaryan’s speech was a call for autonomy for Armenians living in Georgia’s Javakheti region. He declared that Javakh was ‘now a part of the Armenian agenda’ and accused successive Georgian regimes of discrimination and exploitation of the country’s Armenian population.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, after the war, Javakheti problem gained more significance for both sides because of the regions corridor position between Russia and Armenia via Georgia. A typical reflection of Georgian disturbance about Armenia’s attempts by using Javakheti card had been former Georgian Foreign Minister’s reaction to the questions on the matter. Grigol Vashadze, who is on a visit to Yerevan, at a press conference said “I don’t know what *Javakhk* is: there is no *Javakhk* region on the map”. Vashadze’s response was to a journalist’s question regarding Tbilisi’s delay in signing the European convention of regional languages and the impact of that delay on the continuing education crisis in the Armenian-populated region of Javakheti.<sup>22</sup>

Georgia’s parliament unanimously approved a government proposal on 19 April 2011 to dissolve a military transit agreement with Russia, which allowed the latter to deliver cargo to its base in Gyumri through land and via Georgia’s airspace. The agreement on transit of military personnel and cargo, giving Russia access to its 102<sup>nd</sup> military base in Gyumri, was

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<sup>20</sup> *Georgia: The Javakheti Region’s Integration Challenges*, International Crisis Group, Europe Briefing No.63, 23 May 2011, p.3.

<sup>21</sup> “US State Department and Javakhk: The WikiLeaks Cables Part I”, <http://asbarez.com/98039/us-state-department-and-javakhk-the-wikileaks-cables-part-i/>, 9 September 2011.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2010/10/05/georgian-fm-there-is-no-javakhk-on-the-map/>, 5 October 2010.

signed in March, 2006 in connection with another agreement that spelled out Russia's military pullout from bases in Batumi and Akhalkalak. Both agreements were ratified by the Georgian Parliament on April 13, 2006. "After Russia's aggression against Georgia, naturally, it was deemed appropriate by the relevant agencies to annul the agreement following expiration of its five-year term," Nino Kalandadze, the Georgian deputy foreign minister, told on the issue.<sup>23</sup>

The problem concerning the neighborhood namely the border pass is not restricted with Russian military transfers. Georgia still does not want to provide Russia a safe launch to Armenian territory and this has reflections on Javakheti problem as well. This Russian-Georgian checkpoint is critical for Armenia to obtain reach to the north again. Despite some verbal commitments over the Upper Lars (situates in Georgian-Russian border but important especially for Armenia who seeks to sell their products to Russia and who wants to counter Azerbaijan-Turkey direction) border gate talks, a conclusion came very late. Saakashvili, in his visit to Yerevan in June 2009 expressed readiness to comply with Armenia's desire for the reopening of the Upper Lars border-crossing point that divides Georgia and Russia. Saakashvili pledged immediate action on Tbilisi's part as soon as Moscow agreed to reopen its side of the frontier to trade. Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan stressed that Yerevan considered the border reopening to be a vital economic priority, given Russia's importance as an importer of Armenian produce.<sup>24</sup> Two states agreed to re-opening by a Swiss mediation and the commitment gat into force in July 2011.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Turkish-Georgian Relations***

The August war also had implications for Ankara, as Russia tried to regain control over pipeline routes to Turkey. Ankara is an important actor in the Caucasus, presenting itself as a neighbour and strategic and economic partner, and provides military assistance – training and equipment – to Georgia and Azerbaijan. In addition, Turkey is an important link for the EU to the South Caucasus and Central Asia. It is a strategic partner for both the EU and the US, and is developing closer relations with Russia in terms of trade and energy. Indeed Turkey's closer ties with Russia are also related to the resistance Ankara is facing from the EU in its accession process. The Georgian-Russian crisis placed Turkey in a difficult position, not only between

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<sup>23</sup> "Georgia Cuts Off Russian Military Transit to Armenia", <http://asbarez.com/952-56/georgia-cuts-off-russian-military-transit-to-armenia/> 19 April 2011

<sup>24</sup> "Armenia: Saakashvili Visit to Yerevan Produces Lots of Smiles, Little Action", <http://www.eura-sianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav062609a.shtml>, 25 June 2009

<sup>25</sup> "Upper Lars Border Checkpoint Opens For Russian Citizens", <http://www.arm-town.com/news/en/trt/20110702/153556/>, 2 July 2011

neighbouring partner countries, but also in the wider confrontation between the US and Russia.<sup>26</sup> Turkey did not take part in one of the parts, made clear statements of the territorial integrity of the states and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Turkish proposal for a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP) may be read as a further step in this direction. However, this initiative could not be realised because of various reasons.

Georgia's relations with Turkey have been vital for this country since its independence. Even in Gamsakhurdia and especially in Shevardnadze eras, relations developed day by day significantly in economic manner. As the only former Soviet direct land link to the Caspian Basin and Central Asia, Georgia's west borders (especially the Sarp border gate) helped Turkey to lever the Caucasus and Central Asia game. On the other hand, with its damaged and worsening relations with Moscow, Georgia saw Turkey as a potential regional ally and an economic gate to the West. The Velvet Revolution fortified this political situation and August War highlighted Tbilisi's necessity for her neighbour's favor.

However Turkish priorities for the regional security have somehow changed mostly because of the suspicions over US interest in the Black Sea. The crisis climate of US-Turkey relations under the conditions of Iraqi War was a critical point for both sides. By the year 2005, at the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, Turkish-Russian relations developed in many areas but energy was the forerunner. This growing rapprochement by all means had impacts on Black Sea policies. Turkey, like Russia, opposes a large-scale US presence in the Black Sea. This reflects on the attitude of Turkish and Russian sides' views on Montreaux Convention which regulates the legal passage regime of the Turkish Straits. This strategic overlap causes an extent of worry in Tbilisi eventually. Even Turkey placed close to Georgia at the August War, Ankara has never been overly outspoken on Georgia and Ukraine's NATO ambitions, and only moderately criticized Russia's invasion of Georgia and its subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Turkey, heavily dependent on Russian energy supplies, chose not to take an isolationist stance with Russia but rather to engage the Kremlin

Georgia has detained approximately 100 Turkish and other flag ships including fishery vessels in recent 20 years. Turkish flag ships seized by Georgia *Selim 1* and *Şeker Baba* has been sold in Tbilisi in 2003. *Densa Demet* and *New Star* (April 2009), *Buket* (August 2009) were seized as well. *Buket* which has been seized outside the Georgian waters, first taken to Poti Harbour and then to Batumi to be sold. The captain of the vessel who sentenced to 24 years of jail has been released after Turkish FM Davutoğlu's Georgia visit on 31 August 2009. Georgia's seizure or distraint on the vessels sailing at Black Sea through Abkhazia, is stemming from Tbilisi's politi-

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<sup>26</sup> Nona Mikhelidze, *Ibid*, p.35.

cal problem with Abkhazia which is *de jure* Georgian territory but *de facto* apart/independent since 1991. Nevertheless this prosecution harms the Black Sea trade and effects negatively the Turkish-Georgian relations. Legal dimension of the case is another problematic sphere. By the end of 2010, Georgia released all the seized Turkish ships except *Afro Star*. The two governments agreed to establish a work group on the matter and held talks from February 2010.<sup>27</sup>

As we try to itemize the ongoing problematic areas of bilateral relations of Turkey and Georgia, there should be four significant titles:

First; the discomfort of Tbilisi because of the Turco-Russian compromise over the legal status of the Turkish Straits and Black Sea under the circumstances of general regional balance of power. (Turkish dependency over Russian energy should be added to this item). Second; seizure of the Turkish vessels by Georgia. Third; Tbilisi's irritation that stems from the facilities of Abkhazian/North Caucasian civil organizations in Turkey. Fourth; Georgia's expectation to be supported overtly by Ankara on its way to NATO membership.

### **Iran, China and others...**

The absence of common borders between Iran and Georgia can explain why bilateral relations remain limited. The Principles of Cooperation between Iran and Georgia signed during President Shevardnadze's visit to Tehran in 1992 emphasize cooperation at regional and international levels as well as establishing economic exchanges between Iran and Georgia in such fields as gas, transportation, and trade as well as preparation for connecting the Black Sea, the Caspian and the Persian Gulf. Hence, bilateral relationships are overshadowed by economic aspects and cultural ties are not. Such relations have frequently caused US and Israeli nervousness. Washington opposed the establishment of Iran-Georgia strategic relations. In the winter of 2002, Israel warned Georgia that it would stop its cooperation with Georgia if fifty Georgian experts were sent to repair Iranian planes. After the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia in 2003, Iran showed a supportive but cautious response. The Iranian Foreign Ministry stated that no state had to intervene in Georgia's internal affairs. President Khatami congratulated the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, on his election, though conservatives in Iran did not welcome these developments in Georgia. Iran's gas exports to Georgia have been a major pivot in bilateral economic relations, because Georgia

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<sup>27</sup> Hasan Kanbolat, "Gürcistan Elindeki Türk Gemilerini Bırakıyor", <http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/yazigoster.aspx?ID=1354>, 27 December 2010.

has faced many problems in securing its fuel needs since the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup>

After Russia's military attack on Georgia in August 2008, Iran's aid convoy entered Gori, Georgia. Because of its relations with Russia, "Tehran settled for a quiet diplomacy, as a passive bystander, thus causing an attrition of its image as a regional player, which it can remedy by a timely intervention as a mediator in line with its own foreign policy principles and standards."<sup>29</sup>

Georgia is reported to be very interested in joining the Iranian-Armenian energy cooperation.<sup>30</sup> The Iran-Armenia pipeline was opened on 19 March 2007 by the Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Georgia struck a deal with Iran for emergency natural gas supplies in January 2006, as the tiny US ally suffered its worst energy crisis in years and government officials accused Russia of imposing an energy blockade. Georgian officials announced that Tehran was supplying 71 million cubic feet of gas a day via Azerbaijan Republic pipelines. In January 2010 Iranian officials discussed the terms for building two hydroelectric power plants in Georgia with a combined capacity of 36 megawatts.

There is a real geopolitical reason for Georgia's developing relations with Yerevan and it has the same importance vice versa, namely by the Armenian point of view. These two countries are in a kind of siege mentality because of the closed borders. Furthermore, Tbilisi probably wants Yerevan to be more dependent on Iran rather than Russia. Hence Georgia and Iran situate in two extreme opposite sides when the issue is relations with USA. Additionally, Tbilisi sometimes emphasizes the importance of the small ethnic Georgian minority in Iran as an abridging community.

China's strategic partner, the Russian Federation, also displayed its power, but by drastically different means. For the first time since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Russia sent armed military troops onto foreign soil.<sup>31</sup> At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit immediately following the Russian-Georgian War, China and the other members of the SCO declined Russia's request to sign a communiqué endorsing Russia's actions. Their concerns about their own separatist regions told to be effec-

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<sup>28</sup> Elaheh Koolae and Mohammad Hossein Hafezian, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics", *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 43, No.3, June 2010, 391-409, p.405-406.

<sup>29</sup> Elaheh Koolae and Mohammad Hossein Hafezian, *Ibid*, p.405-407.

<sup>30</sup> AP, "Iran, Georgia Strike Gas Deal Amid Crisis," *China Daily*, 13 November 2009, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2006-01/28/content\\_516251.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2006-01/28/content_516251.htm)

<sup>31</sup> Susan Turner, "China and Russia After the Russian-Georgian War", *Comparative Strategy*, Vol.30, No.1, 50-59, p.50. However Turner also states that "*The Russian-Georgian War could have created distance between China and Russia, but it did not. Instead Beijing's ambition for 'unfettered sovereignty and freedom of movement in world affairs' illustrated prior to the war has prompted it to use the war to its strategic advantage, highlighting the instability wrought by U.S. unilateralism and the benefits of a resurgent—and unified—East.*"

tive over this attitude.<sup>32</sup> China also remained silent when Russia called for other nations to recognize the two territories. China's only official statement at the time was, "In accordance with [our] consistent and principled stance on issues of this kind, we hope the relevant parties can resolve the issue through dialogue and consultation."

### **Conclusion remarks**

For a basic conclusion of current foreign policy status of Georgia, some basic remarks can be given briefly:

Georgia's western oriented policy did not affected by the August War in such a level that causable to a shift towards another way. Desire for integration to the Western organizations is still exist. Tbilisi is keen on deepening its relations both with American and European institutions. Although the social grounds of the westward march is somehow deteriorated, political agenda is still on the same direction. Relations with Russia determine the relations with the rest of the world for Tbilisi. In their part, Georgians don't have much things to counter this big neighbor but they succeed to block the WTO membership of Moscow.

Regional security necessities remain but economic interests are to be much more vital because the lost regions should be attracted just by a more powerful Georgia. Unless the opposition comes under an umbrella that consequently be an alternative for the government, bad economic situation will not mean a big question mark over Saakashvili's foreign policy.

Georgia went on support US even militarily although it faced a short but devastative war that Washington did not his best. To ensure US War ships' transiently visits to Georgian Harbours has being seen as a kind of security guarantee.

Relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan have more grown up because of the fully closed northern border. Relations with Armenia did not worsen because of both countries' alarming fear for isolation. However Armenia's Javakh ambitions are going on and both sides know well. Armenia's irritation of joint trio projects (BTC-BTE-Kars-Ahilkerek-Tbilisi-Baku railway) never seems to stop but Tbilisi does not give importance them in such a critic economic condition.

Loss of Orange Ukraine was a kind of loss for coloured sister: Tbilisi. So Georgia observes Kiev carefully but with a deep concern. However, Saakashvili government did not want to lose a country with a huge population of a big potential for future alliance. Policy of gas to fleet balance of the Yanukovich Ukraine means a loss for Tbilisi but Kiev knows that any irre-

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<sup>32</sup> Niklas Swanström, "Georgia: The split that split the SCO, CACI (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute) 09/03/2008, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4930>

versible join into Russia's full sphere of influence may cause a domestic turmoil, so, it has to keep the balance between Russia, West and westerners as well.

Domestic politics is more complex now and it seems to have impacts on foreign policy in near future. Future of the Georgian opposition may have a determiner affect on the future of the sub-regional developments. However the Georgian opposition movements are short to compose vital threats to the rule.

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