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REP Roundtable Summary 03/2011

Dilemmas in Georgia's New Regional Policy

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The government of Georgia drew two lessons from the war with Russia. First, Georgia should continue to strengthen its partnership with the West and continue the project of Euro-Atlantic integration. This is necessary in order for the country to continue its development; it may be regarded as a civilisational choice. Security is also an issue; in 2008, Georgia did not receive as much support from the West as it would have liked. However, western support was crucial for Georgia to maintain its genuine sovereignty: without it, the outcome would have been much graver. Therefore, the 2008 war did not change Georgia's general pro-European and pro-American foreign policy.

The other lesson drawn from the conflict was that Georgia cannot rely solely on western support to guarantee its security; it has to play a more independent role in the region. Whilst good relations with the US and Europe are essential, it has now become clear that it is also necessary to improve relations with the countries in the region. In this respect, Georgia's strategy is similar to Turkey's policy of aiming to have no problems with its neighbours. Russia is a notable exception; no real improvement is expected there. Interaction with Russia is limited to damage control; there have been no attempts to improve relations. Russia expected a regime change to occur after the 2008 war, which did not materialise. The Russian side has pledged not to negotiate with Saakashvili, and it is difficult to backtrack on such a statement. Saakashvili has said he is ready to talk but it is unlikely he expected any talks to happen. Georgia has therefore sought to pursue an active policy in other directions.

20% of Georgia's territory is currently under occupation by Russia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are becoming Russian military outposts. While an invasion is not anticipated, this is a sign that Russia would like to expand its dominance in the region and it is looking for the right moment. The status quo is an impediment to Georgia's internal development. Georgia has marginalised its relations with Abkhazians and South Ossetians; it is difficult to have a rational dialogue with them while Russia is in charge. The ghost of Russia is everywhere. This is an obstacle to democratic development and foreign investment, and it poses a challenge in international relations. Georgia feels marginalised on the international stage because Europe is interested in a rapprochement with Russia and Georgia is seen as an obstacle to this. Georgia has to navigate carefully so as not to be considered a spoiler.

To a certain extent, the war brought clarity to Georgia's policy. It is clear that Russia is in charge in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, thus the issue of their reintegration is basically off the table. It cannot be solved at the moment. No

leader would pledge to solve it by the end of their term in office (as Saakashvili did before 2008). That clarity implies a fairly stable environment.

Still, there are fears that various regional issues could affect the situation negatively and create new challenges for Georgia's foreign policy. Iran's relations with the US and Israel is one of them. There are growing tensions regarding the Karabakh conflict. Renewed hostilities would be very dangerous for Georgia because of their economic impact; attracting foreign investment would become even more difficult if war broke out again in the region. In addition, Georgia is dependent on Azerbaijan in terms of energy. Georgia has been trying to maintain balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Saakashvili has managed to develop good personal relations with both Ilkham Aliyev and Serzh Sargisyan. Relations with Turkey are also good, even though there are concerns about Turkey's future direction.

Recently, Georgia introduced new policies towards Iran, Belarus and the North Caucasus. These policies have met with mixed reactions in the West. Georgia's relations with Belarus and Iran in particular have generated controversy. They are evidence of a more pragmatic foreign policy agenda. The change was triggered by the August war; there was a fear that Belarus and Iran would recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In 2007, Georgia arrested an Iranian arms trader and handed him over to the US, which caused an outrage in Iran. To calm the situation, Georgia's Foreign Minister visited Iran and had a meeting with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Since then the new policy towards Iran has been quite successful; as of February there is a visa free regime between the two countries. Georgia is keen to encourage cultural and economic contacts. However this does not represent a change in the general orientation of Georgia's foreign policy, even though Iran's leadership may be interested in closer relations.

Regarding Belarus, some of the Georgians who supported the Belarussian opposition during the previous election are now involved in deepening ties with Lukashenko. The rationale for this change is that Georgia would not like to see Lukashenko's policies becoming completely pro-Russian. It is generally agreed that he is a dictator, but there is also the issue of double standards; the EU has been much more critical towards Belarus than Russia when it comes to deficiencies in democracy. At the same time, Georgia's leadership understand it is important to calibrate their policy so as not to be seen as too supportive of Lukashenko.

There have been mixed reactions to Georgia's policy towards the North Caucasus; it is often seen as an unnecessary provocation of Russia.

Relations between Georgia and elites in the North Caucasus have been ambivalent for the past 20 years. There were close ties during Gamsakhurdia's presidency, but Shevardnadze was more careful. The North Caucasus is a trouble spot on our borders, and we have little capacity to influence future developments there. However, it is likely that the region will continue to cause problems and therefore Georgia cannot afford to ignore the region. The aim is to create goodwill towards Georgia among the people in the North Caucasus; to encourage contacts with different groups and create an outlet for young North Caucasian elites who feel trapped between Putin and Umarov and want economic development and modernisation. The goal of these contacts is to spread a positive message about Georgia. Last month, Georgia launched a new Russian-language TV channel, called Kanal PIK, which broadcasts in the North Caucasus. The visa free regime has been very successful, at least in the government's opinion. Among other things, it offers the citizens of the North Caucasus the shortest route for hajj. The government believes it is good for people to come and see Georgia for themselves, and compare Russian propaganda with the reality.

Questions and Discussion

The first question was about the recent events in the Middle East and North Africa. Have they had any impact in Georgia, have they provided an encouragement for the opposition? The speaker argued that the events had had no real effect. There has been almost no public reaction to the events in Tunisia or Egypt from Saakashvili. The opposition has not taken advantage of the events either. Besides, the opposition is too discredited and divided, and the government is fairly popular. The speaker said that he did not think there was any revolutionary momentum in Georgia. The government is more concerned about the future developments in Egypt and the possibility of a geopolitical shift in the Middle East.

The next question was about Russia's possible entry to the WTO, currently blocked by Georgia's veto. Tbilisi and Moscow should hold talks about the issue this year. In response, it was said there have not been any overtures from the Russian side, and it is unlikely that Russia would make the first move in public, even though they may test the ground. Georgia will seek concessions from Russia before withdrawing its veto. The view in Moscow is that Russia should bypass Georgia and discuss the issue with the US; the US would be able to force Georgia to withdraw its veto.

A participant asked about the decline in foreign direct investment in Georgia. Would Russian involvement in Georgia's economy be seen in a negative light? The speaker replied that given that Georgia has failed to attract the 850 million dollars of FDI that its government consider necessary for fast enough growth, it is open to investment from any country, including Iran and Russia. The opposition sometimes criticises the government for selling Georgian industry to Russia, but should Russian businessmen be interested in investing in Georgia, it is unlikely they would face any problems.

Discussion turned to security issues. Armenia and Russia renewed their agreement about Russian lease of the base at Gyumri last year. What was the reaction in Georgia to this? The speaker explained that the Georgian government was obviously not pleased and the media did not welcome the move either. At the same time, the government accepts that this is one of the things it cannot change. The threat of Russian-Armenian military cooperation could be reduced by maintaining good relations with Armenia. Tbilisi also assumes that Armenia's cooperation with Russia is not aimed at Georgia.

The next question was about Georgia's response to the cyber attack in 2008. In reply, it was said that the cyber attack was a major issue during the August war and if there was another crisis, it would arise again. The relevant agencies are presumably preparing for such an eventuality but the work is not discussed in the public domain.

A participant asked about the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia's pursues a policy of no engagement with the local leadership, especially in Sukhumi. It fears doing so would bestow legitimacy on the local regimes, which could be dangerous given Russia's influence in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Is Georgia not closing doors with this attitude? The reply was that Georgia does not expect any immediate benefit from contacts with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian leadership that would bring the two sides nearer to an agreement. However, it is understood that contacts with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian communities should not be cut, and in the end their leaders are also part of the community. The speaker agreed that it would be useful to engage the leadership even if there is no immediate effect, but it is difficult to find a suitable format. Regarding the public perception of liaison with these groups, given that all such activities are low profile, there has not been much public reaction. However, the need for some contact is generally acknowledged.

A participant commented that Georgian politicians often label Abkhazia as an occupied territory and its residents as traitors. He said that Georgia was trying

to isolate Abkhazia and has effectively monopolised all communication channels with the West. This attitude prevents any positive developments in the conflict; it irritates the Abkhazians and seriously undermines their trust towards Georgians and the Georgian government. The speaker responded that the residents were not labelled as traitors. The current approach of the Georgian government is that Georgia's main conflict in Abkhazia is with Russia. Until there is a change in Russia's policy, very little can be achieved, and talking to the Abkhaz leadership will bring no benefit in the short term. At the same time, the government understands that this approach is not conducive to improving Georgia's image and acknowledges that it is necessary to engage the Abkhaz community.

A member of the audience asked whether there has been a change in Georgia's view of the OSCE and the EU in relation to the conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nicolas Sarkozy was very active in the immediate aftermath of the August war, but very little effort has happened since, whether through the External Action Service or the Eastern Partnership. Could Georgia make use of any aspect of the EU's policy? In response, it was said that the Georgian government is very sceptical of the capability of the OSCE. There are no expectations of a major EU involvement in regional security; but there is an understanding that the EU is a major player in the region. It is therefore in Georgia's long term interest to develop bilateral relations as much as possible; there has been some progress on visa agreements and negotiations on an association agreement were launched recently.

The next question was about the advice given to Saakashvili during his meetings with Western statesmen. Do they ask him to negotiate with Russia? In reply, it was said that the western advice has remained the same, namely to talk to all parties concerned. The only change is that before the war the Georgian government thought the conflict was soluble, but now the general opinion is that it cannot be solved in the near future. It is also sometimes said informally that Georgia should recognise the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and move on, but this piece of advice is unlikely to be heeded.

Moving on to the newer directions in Georgia's foreign policy, a participant asked about the recent exhibition on Circassian history that took place in Tbilisi. The winter Olympics in 2014 are to be held in Sochi, close to the ancient homeland of the Circassians. 2014 will mark the 150th anniversary of the Circassian defeat by Russians and their subsequent deportation to the Ottoman Empire. What is Georgia's attitude towards the Circassian issue? In response, it was said that the Circassians believe they were a target of a policy of extermination, and raising awareness about this issue is the main

item on their agenda. They insist that it should be recognised as genocide. The Olympics provide a good background for this campaign. The speaker stated that he personally believed it is important that the issue be studied, and awareness about it should be raised. Since Russia's policies towards the region in the 19th century were coordinated from Tbilisi, Tbilisi provides a good background for these activities. In addition, there is considerable material available in the Tbilisi archives. Two conferences about the Circassian issue have taken place in Tbilisi. There are some champions of the Circassian cause in the Georgian government, but there are also those who consider it too controversial. There is a possibility that Georgia would recognise the Circassian genocide, but it would complicate other policy issues. For one thing, it would bring the issue of the Armenian killings of 1915 into focus, which would in turn put the relations with Azerbaijan under pressure. It would create a very difficult situation for Georgia.

The next question was about the impact of PIK TV in North Caucasus. There have been disconcerting reports about the freelancers working for this channel, claiming some of them have come under pressure from Ramzan Kadyrov. In reply, it was said that this was to be expected; it had been clear from the start that the project would not please Russia. For the same reason, many parents in North Caucasus are reluctant to send their children to get an education in Georgia, there is a fear it may expose them to unwanted attention from local or federal officials in Russia.

A member of the audience asked about the reactions to PIK TV in the Russian-speaking world. Was there a popular belief that the channel was launched to provoke Russia? Is there not a risk that it could worsen relations with other Russian-speaking neighbours? The speaker answered that the aim was not to provoke Russia, although displeasing Russia was unavoidable. The channel was primarily aimed at the North Caucasus. Its effect on the Russian-speaking world is difficult to judge; but there is no reason why it should antagonise people – there are no hostile programmes.

The next question was about the understanding of the concept of so-called smart power in the region. It was mentioned before that Georgia is trying to cultivate human capital in the North Caucasus, so presumably its approach is based on soft power. In response, it was said that Georgia indeed sees itself as a potential source of soft power in the region. In the Soviet period, Tbilisi was a point of attraction for North Caucasus elites. In some way, the current initiatives represent an effort to re-establish these ties. The danger is that if Moscow sees these efforts as deserving a hard-power response, it may create complications for Georgia. Still, it is difficult to imagine that Russia

would invade Georgia in order to suppress PIK TV. It is certainly true that Russia has been using soft power to gain influence in Georgia: the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of its arms. Many Georgian clerics were educated in Russian seminaries and see western liberalism as a threat to their influence and values.

A participant commented that diversification of foreign policy is not new or unusual, and maintaining balanced relations is relatively easy until a crisis arises. At what point could the various strands of Georgia's foreign policy come into conflict? For example, could improved relations with Iran complicate the relationship with the US? The speaker replied that it was normal to face foreign policy dilemmas, for Georgia these are relations with the US and Iran, as well as Azerbaijan and Armenia. He said he believed that Georgia's relations with Iran are coordinated with the US at some level; it is likely that the US is informed about the steps about to be taken. Washington is more concerned about Georgia's activism in the North Caucasus because Russia considers Georgia a Trojan horse of American imperialism, and Americans are therefore held responsible for Georgia's actions. Another participant reminded the audience that in 2008, Georgia extradited an Iranian agent purchasing sensitive elements to the US. Georgia has been trying to improve its relations with Iran, but given that 50% of Georgia's GDP is dependent on the US, how would Georgia react if a similar issue arises? The speaker responded that if a clear choice has to be made, it will be in favour of the US, but Georgia will seek to avoid facing this kind of dilemma in the first place.