



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk
Charity Registration Number: 208223

Russia and Eurasia Programme Roundtable Summary

Georgia's New Strategic Approach to Conflict Resolution

Temuri Yakobashvili

Minister for Reintegration and Deputy Prime Minister of Georgia

22 April 2010

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

Georgian State Minister for Reintegration, Temuri Yakobashvili, presented Georgia's new strategy for engaging with the peoples of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region entitled State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation. The following is a summary of his remarks and the subsequent question and answer session.

The underlying premise of the document is that we must engage with the occupied territories. Isolation would effectively mean giving them to Russia for free. We also believe that Georgia, as the expelled sovereign, has an obligation to take care of its people. Issues relating to security and status have been omitted from the document on purpose. The government believes that a paradigm shift took place in 2008. Until 2008, the conflict was regarded as an internal conflict of Georgia and always referred to as such. Since 2008, these conflicts have not been primarily internal in nature, but directly involve the Russian Federation, which has used separatists to undermine the Georgian state. This requires a different methodology and a new approach. Since we are dealing with an international conflict, the issue of security must be approached on an international level, through the Geneva talks. Regarding the issue of status, this is a decision which must be made by all parties and can only happen after the full repatriation of Georgian citizens. One cannot discuss status if only one community is consulted. Repatriation means the voluntary, dignified and secure return of all former residents of the occupied territories. It depends on the security situation and hence also falls within the Geneva discussions. The position of the Georgian government on security is very clear. There can be no military solution to the conflict. Security must be achieved by establishing an international mission.

All other issues which do not touch on security and status (health, trade, environment, development) are part of the strategy. The intention of the government is to make the population of the occupied territories beneficiaries of the positive processes taking place in the rest of Georgia. The aim is not merely to identify areas where this can happen, but to establish the necessary mechanisms for these ideas to be carried forward.

In drawing up this document, the government engaged all relevant NGOs in Georgia and consulted intensively. International NGOs were also involved. There was also consultation with opposition parties and the strategy was subject to parliamentary debate. Special sessions took place with the IDP communities and ideas arising from the Confidence-Building Meetings between Abkhaz and Georgians were also incorporated. We have had opportunities to share drafts of the strategy with relevant figures in Abkhazia. We have not succeeded in doing this in South Ossetia. The Government was

not able to incorporate all the ideas put forward; certain choices had to be made.

Russia's initial reaction to the document was that it could not have been written by Georgians, it must have been drafted by US officials because Georgians are not that smart. Then Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin said the plan was good but late, and attacked the plan for referring to Georgia's territorial integrity. Finally, the Russian Government said that the document was late but merits study, which seemed vaguely positive. The reaction in Abkhazia was that this was a document written for Europeans to get money. Eduard Kokoity of South Ossetia said it was 'genocide disguised as diplomacy'. However, people in Abkhazia were interested, and looked forward to the practical steps it promised. The Georgian government is already in a position to deliver in certain areas, particularly health care. We have cardiac facilities which are not available in Abkhazia, we have a governmental agreement to supply insulin to Abkhazia. A few weeks ago, copies of the relevant archives in Tbilisi were sent to Abkhazia to replace those damaged in fighting. This project was financed by the UK government. These are small steps so far. Our policy is not to publicize these moves and not to politicize them.

Questions and Discussion

How do you envision creating an integrated socio-economic zone, which is a key part of the strategy, given the fragile security environment?

The Georgian Government has decided to engage – this means not only opening the door to people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but facilitating movement. It is essential that people interact. There is a popular misconception that there is no interaction across the border. Currently there are around 2000 crossings per day over the administrative border line. The main driver of this is economic. Prices are three times lower in Zugdidi than Sochi, and they are extremely high in Abkhazia, so there is an incentive for trade with Georgia. The Georgian government has to build favourable conditions for trade across the administrative border line. There are also opportunities to provide certificates of production and quality control for Abkhaz goods.

Has there been any serious discussion with Russia about the strategy?

No, because the channels for dialogue are lacking. The only channel that exists is the Geneva talks, which is restrictive. The Georgian Government has not discussed the strategy with Russia because the strategy is not about Russia. It is about our people, and there is no place for negotiation about this. The only instruments Georgia has to influence Russia's position are the international community and international fora. The Kremlin's attitude is as inflexible as ever.

Could you say a little more about the Georgian government's media and communications strategy for the territories?

The government is trying to be pro-active. Internet access should be free and there will be no restrictions. President Saakashvili has already promised free computers for schoolchildren. The more exposed they are to Georgia, the better partners they will be. Also, the Georgian Government is guaranteeing free access and security for all journalists travelling from these territories to the rest of Georgia.

How much self-rule is Tbilisi willing to concede to Abkhazia and South Ossetia within any conflict settlement?

The Government will provide as much autonomy as is possible within sovereign international borders.

Why has the response from Abkhazia been more positive than from South Ossetia?

The population of South Ossetia is shrinking dramatically. Before the war it was 70,000. Half of the population was driven out by separatists, and many children were evacuated before the war started to North Ossetia. There are also very few jobs. Today, the population is largely elderly. Kokoity and his Prime Minister, seconded from Russia, are stealing much of the aid being sent to them. If South Ossetia does not trade with the rest of Georgia it will face food shortages. The Roki Tunnel is often blocked due to unfavourable weather. The price of tomatoes in Tsinkhvali was eight euros per kilo this year. Many people have left. Those who remain are either Kokoity's people, or those who have been totally alienated. Those who express any interest in negotiation are arrested or harassed.

Could you comment on the recent arrest of a man attempting to smuggle nuclear material through Georgia?

NATO has named as three of the main threats to security – failing states, organized crime and nuclear proliferation. These threats are coming together in the occupied territories. We arrested a man smuggling more than a kilogram of enriched uranium. We contacted Russian and US authorities and offered to cooperate in identifying where the material had originated. Russia ignored our request.

What differences do you see between the Abkhaz case and South Ossetia? Could you imagine Abkhazia as independent?

I can see differences, but I can't imagine Abkhazia as an independent state. In South Ossetia, Russia is keeping the line of control open. In Abkhazia, Russia is building a border. The territory is being annexed. However, 80 per cent of the population of Abkhazia is in exile. We know from various projects that there are approximately 28,000 school children. Statisticians will tell you that the maximum possible ratio of children to adults is 1:4, so the total population is around 112,000. Is this enough for an independent state? Within this, you have an Abkhaz community, a Georgian community and an Armenian community. Abkhazia has 35 parliamentarians. 31 of them are Abkhaz, one is a Turkish citizen who speaks Abkhaz, but because the other parliamentarians don't speak Abkhaz he has an interpreter to translate from Russian to Turkish. This is an absurd situation. How can we talk of an Abkhaz state in such circumstances?

How will the Georgian government make engagement work? How will you respond to those who fear to engage because they believe it will amount to a recognition of the Georgian position on status?

The basic strategy is that the government will not seek to compete in two areas: money and guns. Georgia possesses better soft power and smart power, and better governance. We are not seeking to impose this strategy on anyone. There must be mechanisms to ensure that those participating in the projects arising from the strategy are not put in danger. Currently you have to be a Georgian citizen to use its health service. We are trying to introduce a Status Neutral ID which would give all citizens in South Ossetia and Abkhazia the opportunity to use Georgia's social services. 20-25 per cent of the population of Abkhazia only have a Soviet passport. If there is no *laissez-passer* arrangement, they have no access to any kind of social services. During the panic over Swine Flu, we sent Tamiflu to Abkhazia because Russia could not provide it. In Abkhazia there are three main health risks: HIV, TB and Hepatitis C. If you go to Russia for treatment you have to go to Moscow, and you have to pay. Treatment in Georgia is free and the treatment

and technology is more advanced. It is areas like this where Georgia has a comparative advantage.

How do you see this strategy impacting on the rest of Georgia, and the North Caucasus?

With this plan we are emphasizing that one cannot solve conflicts in the Caucasus through military means. Representatives from Moldova and Azerbaijan have come to consult over our strategy, to see what relevant lessons they can draw from our experience. The wider Caucasus is very much in need of soft power solutions to the problems faced. Georgia desires a peaceful and stable North Caucasus. We have seen before that when there is conflict in the North Caucasus, this can often spill over into Georgia. Refugees move in and Russia threatens to bomb Georgian territory. We seek to emphasize that there can be no peace in the North Caucasus without cooperation with Georgia. There can be no Olympics in Sochi without Georgia. Russia needs Georgian ports and railways in order to deliver materials for the Olympics. Russia does not have the necessary infrastructure.

You say that isolating Abkhazia is not in Georgia's interest, and engagement can bring the territory back under central control. Surely this underlying agenda will be clear to the Abkhaz? They will see it as a Trojan horse to undermine their independence. How do you make the transition from unilateral overtures to bilateral cooperation?

This transition is already happening. First, Abkhaz officials said that the strategy was a Trojan horse, then after a period of consideration they expressed interest in pursuing the proposals further. The Georgian Government is taking a pragmatic approach, offering cooperation in four core areas: trade and economic interaction, health care, people-to-people exchanges and renewal of infrastructure. We know that not all elements of the plan will appeal to all the people in the territories.

What has been the response of wider Georgian society to the proposals? Is there the political capital in Tbilisi to carry the strategy forward over a long period?

The government is behind the plan but it is keen to show that it is not implementing the strategy itself. The opposition and political elites have endorsed the plan – they were part of it. This gives us an opportunity to be more creative and bold. Some on the fringes of the opposition – including Nino Burjanadze – have ignored the strategy because they cannot say anything positive about those in power.