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From Georgievsk to Tskhinvali: The past and the present of Russo-Georgian relations

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The meeting of the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin (to the left) and the President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili (to the right) on 14th of June 2006 in Moscow, Russia.

Photo: Kremlin.ru

The bilateral relations between Russia and Georgia did not begin from the creation of the Soviet Union. Relations between the two states were initiated in the 15th century when Alexander I of Iberia asked for help from Ivan III of Russia against Muslim invaders.¹ Upon receiving a rejection from the Russian side on his demand, relations were cut but later restored all over again. However, at the beginning of the 18th century in the context of the Persian crisis, relations between the two states intensified with increased Russian interest and activity in the region.

During the early 1720s, the Kingdom of Imereti (Western Georgia) had some informal talks with the Russian side in the context of Russo-Turkish tensions. Meanwhile, the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli was ruled by Vakhtang VI. He was unhappy with the treatment he received from the Persians. Therefore, Vakhtang was in active search for help to escape the Persian vassalage. The siege of Isfahan took the place during the Afghan uprising, led by the Sunni Muslim Hotaki dynasty as a payback for their oppression at the hands of the Persian Safavids². The sieged Shah asked for military support from its vassal Kingdom of Kartli. The eventual support could have broken the siege of the Persian capital. Meanwhile, Vakhtang VI received information from the Russian side that Tsar Peter the Great had intentions to wage a war against the Persians.³⁴ Believing that a Russian military contingent would arrive in Kartli, Vakhtang VI turned down the request to help out the Shah. However, the Russian leader decided not to send his expeditionary forces, leaving Vakhtang VI of Kartli without military support⁵. The consequences were brutal for the Georgian side, as Turks invaded in 1723.

¹ Karamzin, Nikolay, "History of the Russian state" (Russian: История государства Российского), Volume VI, Chapter V, "The continuation of the governance of Ivan" (Russian: ПРОДОЛЖЕНИЕ ГОСУДАРСТВОВАНИЯ ИОАННОВА. Г. 1491-1496), 1816-1826. http://www.spsl.nsc.ru/history/karam/kar06_05.htm Accessed: 05-02-2022.

² Lang, David Marshall, "Georgia and the Fall of the Şafavī Dynasty", Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Vol. 14, No. 3, Studies Presented to Vladimir Minorsky by His Colleagues and Friends (1952), pp. 523-539. https://www.jstor.org/stable/609113?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents Accessed: 04-02-2022.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Gogitize, Mamuka, "TREATY OF GEORGIEVSK OF 1783 YEAR: TO THE PROBLEM OF APPROVAL OF RUSSIA IN GEORGIA", ИСТОРИКИ ГРУЗИИ, pp. 81-90. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/georgievskiy-traktat-1783-goda-k-probleme-utverzheniya-rossii-v-gruzii/viewer> Accessed: 04-02-2022.

⁵ Lang, David Marshall, "Georgia and the Fall of the Şafavī Dynasty" (1952).

In the second half of the same century, the historical treaty of Georgievsk was established, marking the first important bilateral document signed between Georgia and Russia. Erekle II of Kartli-Kakheti Kingdom and Catherine II of the Russian Empire signed the above-mentioned document which would make the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti a protectorate of the Russian Empire. The reason why such a step was taken by the Georgian King was geopolitical. The Southern Caucasus, which was traditionally dominated by the Persians from the East and the Ottomans from the West, was in the need of a power balance⁶. Already ravaged by the two empires on several occasions, the Georgian kingdom was facing a huge threat once again. To avoid destruction and repeated annexation of the Kingdom's territories, Erekle II decided to engage with the Russian Empire to protect his Kingdom⁷. According to the treaty of Georgievsk, the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti would give up sovereignty over its foreign policy. Also, the future Kings of the Georgian Kingdom had to swear loyalty to the Emperor of Russia, as well as to deliver military support during the period of war. In exchange, the Georgian side would get a guarantee for its territorial integrity and support in case of an invasion.

While the treaty in question is an important bilateral document between the two states, that marks the start of Russo-Georgian diplomatic relations, its application can be somewhat questionable. The agreement was signed in 1783 and was ratified reciprocally a year later. The treaty lasted until 1787 when the Russian military withdrew from Kartli-Kakheti. The reason why such a decision was taken is a question of a debate. There are two different versions of the story.⁸ The first suggests that Erekle II breached article four of the Treaty of Georgievsk according to which he did not have any sovereignty over the kingdom's foreign policy. Therefore, he could not engage in negotiations with other neighbours without Russian consent. Furthermore, this version tells us that the Georgian king started to negotiate a separate peace treaty, proposed by the Ottoman side, without consulting the Russians. On the other hand, the second version tells a different story. According to this

⁶ The Journal of Modern History, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Sep., 1930), pp. 368. Published by: The University of Chicago Press. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1898816> Accessed: 24-10-2021 22:35 UTC

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Gogitize, Mamuka, "TREATY OF GEORGIEVSK OF 1783 YEAR: TO THE PROBLEM OF APPROVAL OF RUSSIA IN GEORGIA", ИСТОРИКИ ГРУЗИИ, pp. 81-90. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/georgievskiy-traktat-1783-goda-k-probleme-utverzheniya-rossii-v-gruzii/viewer> Accessed: 04-02-2022.

version, Russians withdraw troops to avoid a war with the Ottomans, leaving only a few military units in eastern Georgia. Subsequently, the remaining troops were ordered to leave the kingdom because of the lack of military support. In September 1795, Catherine II decided to send the troops to Erekle II to support him against the enemy invasion. However, the decision arrived after a month to General Gudovich. Meanwhile, on the 8th of September of the same year, the Krtanisi battle took place, from which Persians came out victorious. The battle was devastating for the Georgian side as Tbilisi was destroyed. The Russian advancement continued, however failing to reach Kartli-Kakheti as Catherine II died in 1796 and the plan was halted.⁹

In the aftermath of these events and under the new rulers (Paul I and later Alexander I) in 1801, Russia annexed the territories of Eastern Georgia¹⁰. In the following century, Georgia remained a part of the Russian Empire up until 1918. The latter was the year of the Russian Revolution during which Tsar Nicholas II and his family were executed.

The Bolshevik Revolution gave room for Georgia to re-establish its sovereignty and enter the new world of “statehood”. On the 26th of May 1918, the first democratically elected parliament of Georgia declared independence and established the Democratic Republic of Georgia. The latter, however, remained independent only up until 1921, when the red army invaded and annexed the country. Subsequently, the forceful integration of Georgia into the Soviet Union meant that they lost their sovereignty for almost another century. It is worth mentioning that the Soviet leadership following Lenin’s death consisted of some ethnic Georgians, such as Joseph Jugashvili, also known as Joseph Stalin. Alongside him was Lavrentiy Beria, Chief of the State Security of the Soviet Union. Even during the Soviet era, there were certain hardships between Moscow and Tbilisi. For instance, the protests that erupted in 1978 in Tbilisi, after the new constitution had abolished Georgian as an official language.¹¹ However, Eduard Shevardnadze (then First Secretary

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Hewitt, George, “*Reviewed Work: The Ghost of Freedom. A History of the Caucasus by Charles King*” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (2009), pp. 181-183. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40378863> Accessed: 24-10-2021.

¹¹ De Waal, Thomas. “*The Caucasus: An introduction*” second edition. Pp. 92-93. Oxford University Press, 2018.

of the Georgian Communist Party) managed to negotiate with Moscow to keep Georgian as an official language.¹²

Later in 1989 protests once again erupted in Tbilisi. The Georgians were demanding the restoration of their independence. On the 9th of April of the same year, the Tbilisi Massacre or Tbilisi Tragedy happened (in Russia they use different denominations such as “Tbilisi events - *Тбилисские события*”). The protests were brutally crushed by the Soviet Army, causing the death of more than 20 people.¹³ This momentum of pro-independence protests was not unique to Georgia. It happened almost all over the Soviet Union. In the December of 1991, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved in the aftermath of the formal declarations of independence from several Soviet Republics, including Georgia and Russia.

Therefore, a new era started for the Kartvelian state and the Kremlin. Following the two centuries of Russian domination, Georgia, as well as all of the ex-Soviet republics, had to deal with all types of difficulties while entering into the new millennium. The bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia had been more or less reset to zero. Meanwhile, the leadership of Georgia, alongside the leadership of the Baltic states did not sign the Alma-Ata Declaration. The declaration established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and guaranteed “*the fulfilment of international obligations, stemming from the treaties and agreements of the former USSR*”.¹⁴ In other words, this document would assure a legal continuation of the Soviet-era documents.

At the same time, Georgia was ravaged by its internal conflicts in its regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Meanwhile, the relations with Moscow were not necessarily hostile, but not very friendly either. In 2003, after the Rose Revolution, pro-Western leader Mikheil Saakashvili came to power and directed Georgian foreign policy course towards the West. He wanted to establish a good relationship with the Kremlin, however, the pro-Western course taken by Saakashvili did not please

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ De Waal, Thomas. “The Caucasus: An introduction” second edition (2018). P. 135.

¹⁴ Original text in Russian: “участники Содружества гарантируют в соответствии со своими конституционными процедурами выполнение международных обязательств, вытекающих из договоров и соглашений бывшего Союза ССР”.

¹⁵ Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991. <https://web.archive.org/web/20180808215208/http://gaidar-arc.ru/file/bulletin-1/DEFAULT/org.stretto.plugins.bulletin.core.Article/file/2880>

Moscow. The war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 exasperated the situation furthermore. In the aftermath the war, diplomatic relations were cut, embassies of respective countries closed and ambassadors were recalled for the first time since the treaty of Georgievsk.

Considering all the above mentioned, it is possible to say that Russo-Georgian relations were not initiated based on friendly “will”, but rather on a necessity from the Georgian side in the 18th century. However, the imperialistic approach from the Russian side led to the forceful absorption of Georgia into the Russian Empire and later into the Soviet Union. One might consider overall that Russo-Georgian relations were not great throughout the centuries since the treaty of Georgievsk. However, it was far from awful and have not led to total rupture of the diplomatic link between the two countries. This only happened after the August war in 2008. Therefore, one can ask the following: was the war in 2008 the main reason for an unprecedented break of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia?

To answer this question, it is important to define and understand the relations between the two countries since the break-up of the Soviet Union, up until the Rose Revolution. Last but not least, one should perhaps examine the state of relations during the period of pre-war, from 2004 up until 2008 and the period following the conflict.

I. From the independence to the colour revolution: state of relations with Russia

The Georgian independence of 1991 was a process that got initiated with the events of the 9th of April 1989 alongside the global dynamic within the Soviet space. However, the protests in the question were not the only aspect that led to Georgian independence. To understand the development of the Russo-Georgian relationship, one has to start with the first President of Georgia and his policy towards Russia. Secondly, it is of crucial importance to analyse the post-Gamsakhurdia period where the nationalist President Zviad Gamsakhurdia got swiftly replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, the last Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, who ruled the country from 1995 up until the Rose revolution of 2003.

a. Gamsakhurdia's approach towards Russia

While the world was witnessing the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the Soviet Union was suffering from internal political and ethnic tensions. The dissolution of the USSR did not happen overnight. It started in 1988 when Moscow started to lose control of the local governments in different Soviet Republics, such as the Baltic states. However, 1989 was an intensive and conflict-ravaged year for the Communist superpower. The first internal conflict with the ethnical pretext happened in the autonomous Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh in Soviet Azerbaijan, where ethnical tensions were transformed into a bloodshed between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azeris. Also, the opening of a Georgian branch in the University of Sokhumi¹⁶ served as an initiator of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict. The events of the 9th of April in Tbilisi took place that same year.

This was the overall context that Zviad Gamsakhurdia inherited as President. His nationalistic approach was evident way before he took office. For instance, he would treat and call people of different ethnicities residing in Georgia “guests” that had to return to places where they came from. At one point, he and Boris Yeltsin (the first President of the Russian Federation) had one thing in common: they both wanted to bring down the Communist regime. However, Gamsakhurdia did not last long

¹⁶ Capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia, then an autonomous entity within the Georgian SSR with its own language.

as President of a now-independent Georgia. He was overthrown as a result of a political crisis among the country's political elites. Georgia quickly descended into a civil war where two main groups opposed each other: "Zviadists", who was pro-Gamsakhurdia group and those who were pro-Military Council (or perhaps more anti-Zviadists), established after the overthrow of Georgia's first President¹⁷.

While the period of his presidency was somewhat short, he still managed to make some decisions regarding Russia. One of them was the refusal to sign the Alma-Ata declaration in 1991. Georgia was not the only post-Soviet country not to sign the document. The Baltic states refused to sign the declaration as they perceived the Soviet occupation of their territories in the 1940s as illegal.

Nevertheless, concrete foreign policy actions towards Russia were absent under the Gamsakhurdia mandate. Instead, the first President of Georgia was hanging on conspiracies, according to which Moscow was trying to overthrow him. Georgian foreign policy was therefore based on his "obsession to rid the country of "KGB spies" and liberate it from the "Soviet and Russian yoke".¹⁸

The turbulent period of Gamsakhurdia's presidency most certainly left a conflicting legacy in Georgian society. However, his ultra-nationalistic rhetoric boosted separatism in ethnically heterogenous parts of Georgia and left the impression of anti-Russian sentiment. Subsequently, the new context was inherited by the prominent Georgian figure of Eduard Shevardnadze, also known as the 'Silver Fox'.

b. The Silver Fox: the last Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union

It would be fair to say that Shevardnadze, as one of the key actors of "Perestroika" and "Glasnost", had a successful diplomatic career on the international and Soviet level. However, the same cannot be said about his time as the second President of independent Georgia. He inherited a chaotic and divided Georgian society plunged into ethnic conflicts

¹⁷ Thomas, De Waal. "The Caucasus: An introduction" second edition. pp. 135-136. Oxford University Press, 2018.

¹⁸ Kotchikian, Asbed, "The Perceived Roles of Russia and Turkey in Georgian Foreign Policy", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 37, 2004. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26328481?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents Accessed: 05-02-2022.

alongside the brief civil war. However, he managed to shape the Russo-Georgian relations, navigating first, through the Yeltsin-era and lastly through the early Putin-era.

When Shevardnadze accepted the invitation to share power in the Military Council, alongside the likes of Tengiz Kitovani and Jaba Ioseliani, he indirectly confirmed his support for the destitution of Georgia's first President. His views on Russia, which will be discussed later in the text, happened to be paradoxical. On one side he viewed Russia as an ally, but on the other hand, the new ruling elite of Russia despised him and Mikhail Gorbachev because of their reforms. Moreover, the fact that Russian involvement became apparent in the Abkhazian conflict made things more complicated for Shevardnadze. Some even argue that without the Russian involvement in the conflict, the outcome might have been different.¹⁹

Compared to Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze's views on Russia were very different, as he saw Moscow as an ally, rather than an enemy. For him, Russia was an opportunity to stabilize Georgia. However, his arrival as a leader of an interim government lacked legitimacy, which did not make his work on bringing back stability any easier. Subsequently, he had certain issues in controlling armed militias in the country. To fix that, Shevardnadze asked for Russian help. The northern neighbour would send its military to Georgia and guarantee Shevardnadze's place as an interim leader.

However, the Russian help had its price of joining the Commonwealth of the Independent States. This organisation was created shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union and Georgia under Gamsakhurdia's rule decided not to join. It guaranteed the fulfilment of international obligations taken up by the Soviet Union during its existence. It was also a tool for Moscow to keep its influence over former Soviet states. In 1993, Shevardnadze decided to join the CIS. As he described later in his memoirs, this decision was taken in a context where a compromise was necessary: *“The situation forced me to find a compromise: Georgia was forced to become a member of Russia controlled Commonwealth of independent states”*.

¹⁹ Gordadze, Thornike, “Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s”, published in “The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia”, Routledge, 2009, p. 30.

Two years later, in 1995 just before being elected as a second president of Georgia, Shevardnadze gave an interview to “*The Brown Journal of World Affairs*”, where he expressed himself about Russo-Georgian relations. On the question of what will be the future role of Georgia in the region, he said that the previous administration had decided to “sever all links with Russia”, something that he could not explain why.

*“Our relationship with Russia had been seriously troubled. The former authorities of the Georgian Republic decided to sever all links with Russia. I cannot explain why; the decision was made all too quickly and had the result of practically isolating Georgia. However, we have managed to make up for this mistake, and now I can describe our strategic relationship with Russia as positive.”*²⁰

Meanwhile, following his comments about Russia, he showed an appreciation for the help in the process of democratisation that the United States of America offered to Georgia. This shows Shevardnadze’s pragmatic approach to the geopolitical situation, as he did not content himself with just Russia as a partner. On the other hand, the diversification of Georgia’s international partnerships was not well perceived by the new President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin.

In 2002, during the meeting of the leaders of ex-Soviet states in Shymbulak, Kazakhstan, Vladimir Putin expressed his gratitude for the presence of the President of Georgia. He also talked about the US-Georgian anti-terrorist cooperation. As stated by Putin there was “no tragedy” in the fact that certain American military units were present in Georgia.²¹ According to him, the same thing happened in Central Asia and it was completely fine for Russia to have Americans present in Georgian territory. However, he then argued that in the case of Central Asia, Russians were warned about the deployment, but in the case of Georgia, the information came only from the United States.²² Therefore,

²⁰ Shevardnadze Eduard, Loewenstein Andrew B. and Rhee Minkoo, “Beyond Russia: Thoughts on the New East”. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*. Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 103-108, 1995. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590078?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents Accessed: 04-02-2022.

²¹ Shymbulak meeting 2002, The Eduard Shevardnadze Center. <https://www.facebook.com/392260934947245/videos/928475278040758> Accessed : 19-02-2022.

²² *Ibid.*

Georgia was seen by Putin to be in the wrong as it failed to communicate with Russia that American troops were arriving.

When Putin finished his speech, leaders started to head towards the exit. However, two or three seconds after Putin's speech, Shevardnadze took up the microphone to address the response to Vladimir Putin.²³ He started by saying that he agreed with everything that the Russian President said. Nevertheless, he deemed it necessary to nuance the situation, while indirectly responding to what was said by the President of the Russian Federation. According to Shevardnadze, there was no secret in the fact that Georgia and the United States were cooperating in the military sphere, where Americans helped to create and train Georgian border control units. He then proceeded to say that Georgia accepted this help as "no other country" in the world could help organise an anti-terrorist unit.²⁴ This way, he indirectly said that Russia did not have the capacity to do such a thing. Shevardnadze also deemed it financially difficult to create such a unit, and that was why Georgia would continue to welcome Americans into the country.

The Shymbulak case clearly demonstrates the complexity of the Russo-Georgian relations during the end of the Shevardnadze era. With the arrival of Vladimir Putin in Russia, the attitudes towards the western implications in Georgia began to be, at the very least awkward or at the very most problematic for the Kremlin.

Meanwhile, one may ask why the topic of anti-terrorism became so important for Georgia and Russia (even for the USA for that matter). After the 9/11 attacks in New York, the George W. Bush administration started to push hard on terrorism worldwide. Meanwhile in Russia, Chechen separatists were trying to gain independence. Georgia got dragged into the Chechen quagmire after Russia threatened to launch a cross-border attack against Chechen separatists who had taken refuge in Pankisi gorge, Georgia. The Islamic fighters were problematic for the US as well, considering the global dynamic that the 9/11 event created. In this context, Georgia needed to rapidly establish order in the area. That is when Americans got involved to help with the training of the Georgian anti-terrorist forces. In the meantime, the Chechnya conflict was used as

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

a pretext by Russia to introduce a visa regime for Georgians in 2000.

In summary, Shevardnadze inherited a rather difficult situation from his predecessor. The country was plunged into ethnical and internal conflict. While his predecessor, Gamsakhurdia was known for his anti-Russian views, Shevardnadze himself viewed Russia as an opportunity to stabilize a torn Georgia. He believed that Russia was a pacific neighbour and his foreign policy reflected that. Meanwhile, Shevardnadze tried to diversify his country's international partners by establishing relations with the United States of America.

However, a popular revolution that was known as a "Rose Revolution" took place in 2003. This time around, Shevardnadze was facing an angry mob, gathered to contest an allegedly fraudulent election as well as the poor economic and infrastructural situation in the country. The leader of the "revolutionary" movement happened to be his former Minister of Justice, Mikheil Saakashvili.

II. Saakashvili's pre-war period and aftermath of the conflict

The rose revolution brought a change not only to the leadership of Georgia but also to its foreign policy. An uncompromised Western orientation introduced by Saakashvili happened to irritate Moscow and the relations started to progressively deteriorate. Subsequently, it culminated in a war that took place in August 2008, over the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia.

a. The progressive increase of the tensions between Tbilisi and Moscow

Mikheil Saakashvili, who had previously served as a Minister of Justice under Shevardnadze, decided to go against the second President of Georgia while accusing him of corruption and failure to put through necessary reforms. In 2003, Mikheil Saakashvili led a popular uprising, that came to be known as the "Rose revolution". The movement was contesting the election results (according to which Shevardnadze had won the electoral competition) and deemed elections as rigged. As a result, Shevardnadze resigned from office. In the newly held elections that same year, Saakashvili came out victorious.

The new young leader had specific goals for his presidency. He set the Georgian foreign policy course towards the West and made NATO membership and European integration the primary objectives of his country. Meanwhile, he had the ambition to restore the territorial integrity of Georgia. However, the third President of Georgia inherited a context in which Russia had a significant influence over the country's energy sector. Also, the presence of Russian military units in Georgia proper was another factor to consider. Saakashvili was not in favour of Russian influence in Georgia. He intensified negotiations to withdraw Russian military units from the country. Saakashvili equally tried to decrease his country's energy dependence on Russia.

During Saakashvili's presidency, the relationship with Russia became rather turbulent. It was marked with frequent escalations, diplomatic rows, accusations and sanctions. However, pressure from Moscow started to increase gradually. Somehow this gradual increase was happening in correlation with the rapprochement of Georgia with the West.

The first signs of Russia's disliking of Saakashvili and his movement appeared perhaps during the Adjara crisis. The latter is often perceived as the first and the last success by Saakashvili to re-establish central government control over a Georgian region. During the Adjara crisis, the South Western region was led by Aslan Abashidze, a Saakashvili opponent. In 2003, just after the Rose Revolution in Tbilisi, Abashidze introduced a state of emergency in Adjara, which perhaps marked the beginning of tensions between the new central government and Aslan Abashidze. Later, when Saakashvili tried to enter the region, the administrative border was closed down by the pro-Abashidze armed groups. This marked a serious escalation. Subsequently, economic sanctions followed from the central government, which led to an agreement between Abashidze and Tbilisi. However, tensions escalated all over again after the refusal from Abashidze to disarm his units. The crisis ended with Abashidze exiling to Moscow and Adjara having a new government. Russia played an important role in this crisis as it provided protection to Abashidze to leave for Moscow.

In 2004, the same year as the previous crisis ended, tensions continued to increase, but this time, between Russia and Georgia over the events in the region of South Ossetia. Saakashvili did not hesitate to throw accusations at Russia and vice versa. Progressively, the official Tbilisi rhetoric started

to become more accusatory and direct towards Russia. Georgia started to openly accuse Russia of supporting separatists in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Meanwhile, Moscow was becoming increasingly irritated over Saakashvili's accusations and his 'all-out towards the West' policy. Therefore, Russia started to openly take sides in Georgia's internal conflicts. Namely, in May 2004, Georgian interior troops were sent to Tskhinvali in South Ossetia to crackdown smuggling.²⁵ This move was seen by Russia as a violation of the 1992 agreement and resulted in a standoff between Russian and Ossetian forces on one side and Georgian forces on the other.²⁶ The latter though retreated, avoiding a large scale confrontation. From this moment, it was clear that Russia had taken a clear position: it would confront Saakashvili if necessary. However, it would be naïve to say that Russia decided out of nowhere to pick a side in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. It came alongside the intensification of pro-Western policies in Georgia and specifically aspiration to meet NATO military standards in the hopes of one day becoming a member.

The year 2006 was marked by a whole new level of turbulence in Russo-Georgian relations. Major events consisted mainly of pipeline explosions in the Russian region of North Ossetia, cutting Georgia and Armenia off from the Russian gas supply, embargo on Georgian (as well as Moldovan) wine, a spying controversy and a massive deportation of Georgians from Russia. The pipeline explosions that took place in North Ossetia were seen by Tbilisi as blackmail from the Kremlin's side, resulting in Tbilisi officially accusing Moscow of provocations. The explosions also took place during a very cold winter that made Georgia believe that Russia was punishing Georgia, which was trying to decrease energy dependence on Russia.²⁷

Relations deteriorated further when Russia introduced a ban on Moldovan and Georgian wines in 2006. The reason for such a decision was a failure to meet the sanitary standards of the Russian Federation. Specifically, the question of pesticides was troubling according to the Russian sanitary institutions. However, the ban later expanded to

²⁵ Spetschinsky, Laetitia and Bolgova V. Irina. "Post-Soviet or Post-Colonial? The relations between Russia and Georgia after 1991". *European Review of International Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Winter 2014), p. 116. Published by: Verlag Barbara Budrich Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26593315>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Sindelar, Daisy, "Georgia: Tbilisi accuses Moscow of energy sabotage", 2006, Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1064976.html> Accessed: 05-03-2022.

Georgian mineral waters, such as “Borjomi” and “Nabeglavi”. Both Moldova and Georgia viewed the ban as political blackmail from Russia.

The turbulence continued when Georgia arrested several Russian officials in the country under the suspicion of espionage. This was seen by Russia as a provocation from the Georgian side. Moscow even officially presented a draft to the United Nations Security Council to condemn “Georgia’s provocations”. The resolution was however vetoed by the United States. Meanwhile, several days after the spy row, Putin had invited the leaders of separatist governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia at the roundtable of economic development of Southern Russia in Sochi. One has to take into consideration the fact that until 2008, Russia did not recognize those two regions of Georgia as independent States. Therefore, the move was loudly protested by Tbilisi. Nevertheless, the spy row caused the biggest deterioration of relations between the two countries since the fall of the Soviet Union. Vladimir Putin later accused Georgia of “State terrorism with hostage-taking”, comparing it to the practices of Lavrentiy Beria during the Stalin era.²⁸ Subsequently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia condemned Putin’s statements and compared them to a “warlike rhetoric”.²⁹ The Russian rhetoric was matched with concrete actions, as the Kremlin decided to cut all travel links (railway, air, road, maritime and postal links) with the country and to stop issuing visas to Georgians. Meanwhile, Russian troops were still present on the Georgian territory. Throughout, this turbulent year, as a response to sanctions imposed by Kremlin, Georgia even threatened to block Russia’s bid to become a member of the World Trade Organization. Furthermore, massive deportations of ethnic Georgians from Russia caused another diplomatic brawl between the two States. While Georgia accused Russia of “ethnic cleansing”, Moscow rejected all allegations, declaring that deported Georgians had committed immigration offences.

The Human Rights Watch report about the Russo-Georgian war happens to be interesting. While the report describes the prelude to the war, it also provides a brief geopolitical analysis of the situation:

²⁸ Finn, Peter, “Putin and Georgia Officials Intensify Rhetoric in Dispute”, 2006, Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/01/AR2006100100898.html> Accessed: 05-03-2022.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

“By April 2008 communication between Russia and Georgia was being restored, but Russia, angered by Western countries’ recognition of Kosovo’s independence in February 2008 and by Georgia’s continued efforts to join NATO, moved to deepen its cooperation with the breakaway administrations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia responded by blocking further negotiations over Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization. Georgian use of unmanned reconnaissance drones in the airspace above the breakaway republics and the downing of one such drone by a Russian airplane on April 20 strained the relationship further.”³⁰

As one could tell, since the revolution of 2003, relations between the two countries started to rapidly degenerate. One explanation for this could be the Kremlin’s attitude towards the new integration policy of Georgia towards Western institutions. Also, one can observe that Saakashvili did not necessarily play the “compromise game” with Moscow. His headstrong approach perhaps made him inflexible vis-à-vis Russia. However, one has to understand that the Kremlin had its ambitions of keeping its ‘backyard’ under its influence. Therefore, Saakashvili’s policy had a double effect. On one hand, it gave a fair degree of freedom to Georgia in terms of foreign policy and allowed Georgia to break away from Moscow’s orbit. On the flip side, this headstrong approach resulted in a direct collision with Russia.

However, the August 2008 war was not perhaps solely the result of Russo-Georgian tensions. The internal, ethnical conflict with Ossetians was a core issue that most definitely got instrumentalised by Russia to destabilize Georgia.

b. The war of 2008 and its aftermath

The beginning of the year 2008 was somewhat turbulent for the two countries. In April 2008, Putin gave the order to establish official ties between the Russian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities.³¹ It is worth taking into consideration that, up until the war, the Russian

³⁰ Human Rights Watch, “Up In Flames - Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims in the Conflict over South Ossetia”, 2009, p. 20. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/497984202.html> Accessed: 06-03-2022.

³¹ Socor, Vladimir, “Russia moves toward open annexation of Abkhazia, South Ossetia”, 2008, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-moves-toward-open-annexation-of-abkhazia-south-ossetia/> Accessed: 06-03-2022.

Federation did not recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Therefore, the move was heavily criticised by Tbilisi. On the 20th of April of the same year, a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was shot down by an unidentified jet over Abkhazia.³² The United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia later published a conclusion stating that the Georgian drone had been shot down by the Russian air force, also accusing Georgia of breaching the Moscow Agreement.³³ Even NATO got dragged into the situation when the Russian Ambassador to the above-mentioned organisation said that the Georgian drone might have been shot down by a NATO member-owned Mig-29.³⁴ Back then, Georgia even threatened to block World Trade Organization membership application for Russia, following the growing tensions between the two States.³⁵

In early July of the same year, things started to worsen. Tensions between Georgian forces and Ossetian forces started to increase, leading to violent incidents between the two forces.³⁶ Later that month, four Russian jets conducted several overflights over Tskhinvali, violating the Georgian airspace. The overflights were later confirmed by the Russian side while adding that they were necessary to “cool hot heads in Tbilisi”.³⁷ The overflights caused the first major diplomatic rupture between the two States, as Georgia decided to recall its Ambassador from Russia.³⁸ Overall, it is understandable that at this point relations between the two countries were approaching an all-time low level. The path towards a point of ‘no return’ seemed to be closer day by day. The nail in the coffin of Russo-Georgian relations came in early August 2008 when hostilities between Georgian and Ossetian forces reached their peak. Georgian advance on the city of Tskhinvali and Russian forces entering the

³² Civil Georgia, “UN Probe Says Russian Jet Downed Georgian Drone”, 2008, <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18393> Accessed: 06-03-2022.

³³ United Nations News, “Georgia: UN says Russian air force shot down aircraft over Abkhazia”, 2008, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2008/05/260732-georgia-un-says-russian-air-force-shot-down-aircraft-over-abkhazia> Accessed: 06-03-2022.

³⁴ Finn, Peter, “Russia's Moves Add To Strains With Georgia”, 2008, Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/30/AR2008043003256_2.html Accessed: 06-03-2022.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, “Up In Flames - Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims in the Conflict over South Ossetia”, 2009, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/497984202.html> Accessed: 06-03-2022.

³⁷ Human Rights Watch, “Up In Flames - Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims in the Conflict over South Ossetia”, 2009, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/497984202.html> Accessed: 06-03-2022.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Up In Flames - Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims in the Conflict over South Ossetia”, 2009, p. 21.

internationally recognized territory of Georgia, through the Roki tunnel, resulted in a direct military conflict between the two States.

However, following the hostilities between the Russian and Georgian forces, neither Tbilisi nor Moscow decided to officially break diplomatic relations. Even though the Georgian Ambassador had already been recalled following the overflight incident in July of the same year, the diplomatic missions were still operating in the respective countries. Subsequently, the rupture of diplomatic relations between the two States was not caused directly by the August war. In fact, on the 26th of August 2008, Russia's President, Dimitry Medvedev signed an order recognising the independence of the two breakaway regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³⁹ It was following this decision that Georgia decided to indefinitely break diplomatic relations with Russia. Its diplomatic staff was entirely recalled from the Russian Federation soon after.⁴⁰ Therefore, it is fair to say that diplomatic relations got suspended by Georgia as a result of Russian recognition of Georgia's two breakaway regions.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, the relations between Russia and Georgia were initiated back in the 15th century, when Georgia was in need of protecting itself from the Ottoman and Persian empires in order to survive. Its first attempts to establish ties were informal and were left more or less unanswered by the Russian side. Since then, some Georgian kingdoms once again tried to seek an alliance with Russia in order to protect themselves from southern empires. However, the Georgian side did not receive the informally promised help from Russia. Later on, the Treaty of Georgievsk was established as the first important bilateral document between Russia and one of the Georgian Kingdoms, Kartli-Kakheti. Nevertheless, it is unclear what caused the non-fulfilment of the treaty obligations from the Russian side, as multiple potential unverified reasons emerge. Thereafter, Georgian kingdoms were annexed by the Russian Empire and became part of it. Only in 1918, after the Bolshevik Revolution, did Georgia manage to regain its independence, but this time around as a united entity. Nevertheless, this independence only lasted till

³⁹ Tran, Mark, "Russia defies west by recognising Georgian rebel regions", 2008, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/26/russia.georgia1> Accessed: 12-03-2022.

⁴⁰ Tran, Mark, "Russia defies west by recognising Georgian rebel regions", 2008, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/26/russia.georgia1> Accessed: 12-03-2022.

1921, when the Red Army invaded the Republic of Georgia. The latter was therefore integrated into the Soviet Union. Subsequently, the first-ever establishment of modern diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia took place after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Since the second independence, relations with Russia were somewhat complicated. During Zviad Gamsakhurdia's presidency, a clear foreign policy directed at relations *vis-à-vis* Russia was not established. Only personal, somewhat anti-KGB statements and sentiments of the President were made known. Nonetheless, during Shevardnadze's mandate, diplomatic relations started to develop. The second President of Georgia looked at Russia as a partner. However, later on, this belief of Eduard Shevardnadze was being challenged by the role that Russia played in the Abkhazia conflict and with Vladimir Putin's coming to power in Kremlin. When Shevardnadze started to develop diplomatic relations with the United States of America and invited American military instructors in the country, Russia got irritated. This was particularly visible with Putin's reaction to the arrival of American instructors, deeming that this information should have been officially communicated to Moscow by Georgia. The wind towards the West started to blow immediately, after Saakashvili's rise to power. The Western course of the new Georgian leadership did not please Russia. Therefore, irritation progressively turned to accusations, tensions and later on war. However, the answer to the question - that if the war of 2008 was the main reason that constituted an unprecedented break of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia - is now clear. The war itself did not constitute the main reason for the break in relations between the two countries. Although the war was a main, indirect factor to it, the recognition of two Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia caused this break in relations.

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