

# GEORGIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

## BETWEEN NECESSITY AND AMBIVALENCE

*Canan Atilgan / Florian C. Feyerabend*

On 27 June 2014, Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the EU, which represents an important milestone on the European path taken by the young democracy in the Southern Caucasus. Georgia has also made some progress in establishing closer links to the Euro-Atlantic defence alliance. As far back as 2008, the heads of state and government of the NATO member states had expressed their agreement with Georgia joining the North Atlantic Alliance at the Bucharest summit. While the country has not yet received the coveted invitation to join the Membership Action Plan, it has been granted a "substantial package", which elevates it to a high level of integration.

Since gaining its independence almost 25 years ago, Georgia has pursued a clear foreign policy line with a Western outlook. Particularly after the Rose Revolution in 2003, the country has made efforts to advance its integration with Euro-Atlantic structures. Feeling particularly exposed to pressure from Russian hegemonic ambitions, Georgia is above all seeking security guarantees for its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Memories of the 2008 war are deeply embedded in the minds of the Georgian people; they experienced this war as a punitive action by Russia for Georgia's resistance against Russian power politics and for Georgia's clear Western orientation. Against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea in contravention of international law and the current crisis in Ukraine, Georgia feels confirmed in its assessment that Russia considers its so-called near neighbourhood its exclusive sphere of interest and is prepared to counter an expansion of Western influence by any means at its disposal. Correspondingly, Georgia



Dr. Canan Atilgan is Director of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Regional Program for Political Dialogue South Caucasus based in Tbilisi, Georgia.



Florian C. Feyerabend is a trainee at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Regional Program for Political Dialogue South Caucasus.

fears increasing pressure from Russia and consequences for its own security.<sup>1</sup>



Presidential election in Georgia: After the victory in the parliamentary elections in 2012, Georgy Margvelashvili also won the presidential election in 2013 for the "Georgian Dream". The handover of power is seen as the first democratic change of government in Georgia. | Source: Marco Fieber, flickr ©①②③④.

While the relationship with Russia was characterised by disassociation and confrontation under the Saakashvili government, the Georgian Dream coalition government, which has been in power in Tbilisi since 2012, is distancing itself explicitly from the policies of its predecessor government and taking a more pragmatic approach in its dealings with Moscow. However, the government's efforts to reduce tensions have not yet achieved a fundamental improvement in Georgian-Russian relations. The government in Tbilisi does not have any substantial means of countering the creeping annexation of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia. At the same time, Russia is making use of civil society and political organisations supported from Moscow

1 | Cf. Liana Fix, "Georgia Knocking on Europe's Door. Russia, Georgia, and the EU Association Agreement", *DGAPkompakt*, 10, 06/2014, <https://dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/25499> (accessed 25 Jun 2015); Alexander Rondeli, "Georgia-Russia: From negative to positive uncertainty", *Expert Opinion*, 3, 2013, [http://gfsis.org/media/download/library/articles/Expert\\_Opinion\\_ENG\\_3.pdf](http://gfsis.org/media/download/library/articles/Expert_Opinion_ENG_3.pdf) (accessed 25 Jun 2015); Michael Cecire, "Georgia's Fifth Column Stirs", *The American Interest*, 19 May 2014, <http://the-american-interest.com/2014/05/19/georgias-fifth-column-stirs> (accessed 25 Jun 2015).

to undermine the fundamental pro-Western foreign policy consensus, which still has the support of the majority of the Georgian population.

This situation calls for an examination of the relations between Tbilisi and Moscow, ambivalent and conflict-riven from the start, and for an assessment of Georgia's foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia, which has been wavering between confrontation and appeasement. To what extent can the Georgian Dream government, which has been in power since 2012, realise its election promise of normalising relations with the country's large neighbour? What are the repercussions of the annexation of Crimea? What means of "soft power" are available to Russia in Georgia?

### **A BRIEF HISTORIC OUTLINE OF GEORGIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS**

From a historic perspective, Georgian-Russian relations can be described by the terms "necessity and ambivalence".<sup>2</sup> Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Georgia sought protection from the Orthodox Tsarist Empire, which also had expansionist aspirations, because of its geographic location between Europe and Asia and its immediate proximity to the expanding Muslim empires to the south. Russia was therefore initially perceived as a Christian protective power and a force of European modernisation. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the concept of Georgian national statehood emerged in direct opposition to imperialist Russia, which was seen as "uncivilized and unfree".<sup>3</sup> Georgia succeeded in briefly realising self-determination and sovereignty as the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918 to 1921). After the invasion by the Red Army in February 1921, Georgia was annexed to the Soviet Union and did not regain its independence until the spring of 1991 after 70 years of Soviet rule. A brief phase of nationalist, decidedly anti-Russian politics under the first Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia ended soon afterwards, when Eduard Shevardnadze took power in 1992 and began to pursue a multivectoral foreign policy. In acknowledgement of geographic facts, economic interrelations and security dependencies, the "necessity" element manifested in the country's accession to the Commonwealth of Independent States (1993), the signing of a Georgian-Russian friendship treaty (1995), the stationing of Russian peacekeeping troops in the

2 | Stephen Jones, *Georgia. A Political History Since Independence*, London, 2013.

3 | Ibid.

breakaway province of Abkhazia and the acceptance of Russian military bases on Georgian territory. The “ambivalence” element, on the other hand, manifested in the fact that from the early days of its independence Georgia also reached out to the West by participating in the NATO “Partnership for Peace” program and by taking up membership in the Council of Europe, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.<sup>4</sup> The foundations for Georgia’s pro-Western orientation were therefore already laid down under the country’s second President Shevardnadze; Saakashvili would subsequently make strenuous efforts to push ahead with this opening-up to the West.

### **GEORGIA’S BREAKAWAY REGIONS AS PAWNS OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLITICS**

**After the country’s independence from the Soviet Union, the Georgian leadership pursued ethnocentric policies and failed to take proper account of the concerns of national minorities.**

Shevardnadze had risen to power in consequence of a failed minority policy as well as a foreign policy dominated by idealism and nationalism under Georgia’s first President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, which resulted

in the country falling into chaos and civil war. After the country had gained independence from the Soviet Union, the Georgian leadership under Gamsakhurdia pursued chauvinist, ethnocentric policies in a delirium of national fervour and failed to take proper account of the concerns of national minorities in the country. As nationalist policies took hold, dissatisfaction grew in Georgia’s autonomous territories. Abkhazia, which had briefly been independent after the October Revolution of 1917 and an Autonomous Republic within Georgia since 1931, declared its independence from the fatherland in July 1991, unleashing a civil war, which did not end until the autumn of 1993 with a ceasefire, the creation of a UN observer mission as well as the stationing of Russian peace-keeping troops sanctioned by a CIS mandate. In parallel with the armed conflict in Abkhazia, civil war also raged in South Ossetia in 1992, which held the status of an Autonomous Region within Georgia and had already declared its secession from Tbilisi before Georgia gained independence. This conflict ended with a ceasefire that same year, which afforded Russia a military presence under a so-called peace mission similar to the situation in Abkhazia. Under the leadership of Aslan Abashidze, the Autonomous Region of Adjara also attempted to evade control by the central government in Tbilisi. But here, measures to avoid a violent escalation of the conflict as well as the secession of the region were successful.

4 | Cf. *ibid.*

Fig. 1

**Georgia with its secessionist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia**



Georgia's conflict regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Russia seized the civil wars in Abkhazia (1991-1993) and South Ossetia (1992) as an opportunity to intensify its military presence in the region. | Source: © racken.

From the beginning, the Kremlin pursued a dual track policy in the conflicts involving Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On the one hand, Russia acknowledged Georgia's territorial integrity and presented itself as a peacekeeping force; on the other hand, however, the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia received active support and encouragement from Moscow. Maintaining the status quo in the "frozen" conflicts was in Russia's interest as this not only ensured a Russian military presence in the Southern Caucasus but also provided a means of influencing the politics of the Tbilisi government.

Georgia continued to maintain its claim to territorial integrity, but ceased to exert government control over the territories in the mid-1990s. An attempt by the Georgian government to force a military solution to the frozen conflicts after a series of Russian provocations failed. Since the five-day war in August 2008, the separation of the two regions from the Georgian fatherland is established more strongly than ever. Subsequent to the military clashes, Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign states, but only a few other countries, including Venezuela,

Nicaragua and Nauru, followed its example. In reality, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not sovereign state entities but satellite states, which are politically, militarily and economically dependent on Moscow and most of whose inhabitants have taken Russian nationality.<sup>5</sup> Russia maintains that its intervention in August 2008 was justified on humanitarian grounds, making explicit reference to the need to protect "Russian citizens"<sup>6</sup> – a template for what subsequently happened in the course of the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

### **THE SAKASHVILI ERA: PRO-WESTERN ORIENTATION – CONFRONTATION COURSE WITH RUSSIA**

To understand the military escalation of the conflict in 2008 one needs to know the background to Georgia's accelerated pro-Western orientation after the change in power in 2003. The successful "Rose Revolution" not only initiated a phase of domestic reforms and nation state renewal, it also represented a turning point in Georgian-Russian relations. The revolutionaries of the "United National Movement" around the new President Saakashvili had made three promises to the Georgian people: "Democratisation, strengthening the rule of law, and restoration of territorial integrity".<sup>7</sup> To Saakashvili's mind, the natural partners to help realise these promises were to be found in the West, prompting him to seek closer links with the USA and NATO in the first instance.

Relations between Tbilisi and Moscow deteriorated at the same time and became increasingly more confrontational. In the winter of 2004, Russia briefly suspended gas deliveries to Georgia and subsequently imposed a selective price increase – a tactic it would later also apply in its dealings with Ukraine and Armenia.<sup>8</sup>

- 5 | For an up-to-date overview describing the conflicts involving Abkhazia and South Ossetia, see Canan Atilgan/Mikheil Sarjveladze, "Georgia and its Breakaway Regions: No Progress in Sight", *KAS International Reports*, 6/2012, <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.31263> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).
- 6 | During the preceding years, Russia had pursued a systematic policy of naturalisation, with the effect that the majority of the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had Russian nationality by 2008.
- 7 | Uwe Halbach, "Bilanz einer 'Farbrevolution'. Georgien im politischen Wandel 2003–2013", *SWP-Studie*, p. 24, Dec 2013, [http://swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2013\\_S24\\_hlb.pdf](http://swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2013_S24_hlb.pdf) (accessed 29 Jun 2015).
- 8 | Cf. Thomas Kunze/Henri Bohnet, "Between Europe and Russia – On the Situation of the Renegade Republics of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia", *KAS International Reports*, 1/2007, <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.10097> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

In early 2006, Russia imposed a unilateral trade embargo (import bans on wine and mineral water) against the South Caucasian republic. The confrontational course culminated in a diplomatic row when a Russian spy ring operating in Georgia was uncovered to great media attention in late summer of that year, whereupon Russia cut all sea, land, air and postal links to Georgia and deported Georgian guest workers from Russia.<sup>9</sup> Personal animosity between the Georgian President Saakashvili and his Russian counterpart added to the tensions affecting the relationship between the two states. The most significant shortcoming of the Russian policy towards Georgia was the fact that Moscow viewed the country predominantly from a geopolitical perspective, relying purely on military power and economic pressure. The mutual military provocations since 2007 finally sparked the Georgian-Russian war of August 2008.<sup>10</sup> Not only did this war reveal the vulnerability of the east-west corridor to the West, it also meant that NATO membership became a distant prospect for Georgia.<sup>11</sup> Besides the cessation of diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia and Georgia's exit from the Commonwealth of Independent States, the armed conflict also directly caused the breakdown of all efforts that had been initiated to come to an arrangement about the two domestic conflicts relating to the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

**The most significant shortcoming of the Russian policy towards Georgia: Moscow viewed the country predominantly from a geopolitical perspective, relying purely on military power and economic pressure.**

The Georgian-Russian war and the cessation of diplomatic relations did, however, prompt the establishment of the mechanism of the "Geneva Talks". These represent the only forum where all conflicting parties discuss issues of security and stability in the region together with representatives from the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the EU and the USA. The main purpose is to build trust and deal with humanitarian issues. Until the change in government in Georgia in 2012, the Geneva Talks, which take place regularly but do not produce an official outcome, were the only channel of diplomatic communication between Tbilisi and Moscow until the nomination of Georgian Ambassador Zurab Abashidze as Special Representative

9 | Cf. Svante Cornell, "Getting Georgia Right", *Centre for European Studies*, 2013, [http://martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/getting\\_georgia\\_right\\_-\\_website.pdf](http://martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/getting_georgia_right_-_website.pdf) (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

10 | Cf. Ashot Manucharyan, "Abkhazia, and South Ossetia – Russia's Intervention in Georgia (August 2008)", *KAS International Reports*, 10/2008, <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.15189> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

11 | Cf. Cornell, n.9.

for Relations with Russia in November 2012 and the establishment of the Prague Dialogue as a platform for bilateral exchange. During the meetings held in Prague, Zurab Abashidze engages in negotiation on improving Georgian-Russian relations with the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigory Karasin.



Military parade in Tbilisi: The five-day war in 2008 led to Georgia's exit from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). | Source: Rob Sinclair, flickr ©①②.

### **AFTER THE CHANGE IN POWER IN GEORGIA IN 2012: TAKING STOCK OF THE NORMALISATION EFFORTS**

The Saakashvili era ended with the 2012 parliamentary elections and the 2013 presidential elections, which resulted in the Georgian Dream coalition comprising six parties coming to power, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. While the new political leadership confirmed its commitment to continue pursuing integration with European and Euro-Atlantic structures and spoke of the Pro-Western course being irreversible, Georgian Dream also promised a speedy normalisation of relations with Russia. This course adjustment was welcomed explicitly by Western states as this was expected to bring about a lessening of the tensions and an increase in stability and security. This balancing act between a Pro-Western orientation on the one hand and a conciliatory stance towards Russia on the other also reflects the ambivalence in the relationship with Moscow that is prevalent in the population. It is the case that the efforts towards a rapprochement with NATO and



the EU enjoy a high approval rating among the population and that people continue to look upon Russia as a threat to Georgia's security and sovereignty. But at the same time, people would like to see relations with the large neighbour to the north normalising – particularly where the economy and culture are concerned. This goes hand in hand with an expectation among large swathes of the population that trade will bring about an improvement in the economic situation. According to a recent survey, 85 per cent of the Georgian population would therefore support further dialogue with Russia, and 59 per cent rate the current government's handling of Georgia's relationship with Russia positively.<sup>12</sup> And as many as 31 per cent support accession to the Eurasian Union, almost twice the number as a year earlier.<sup>13</sup>

**85 per cent of the Georgian population support further dialogue with Russia, while 59 per cent rate the current handling of Georgia's relationship with Russia positively.**

Once Prime Minister Ivanishvili took office in October 2012, there was not only a more conciliatory tone apparent in dealings with Moscow, but efforts were made to utilise the new bilateral format of the Prague Talks to achieve progress in areas considered less sensitive such as transport, trade, agriculture, visas and humanitarian matters in a pragmatic manner, leaving security issues to one side.<sup>14</sup> Moscow honoured the efforts by the Tbilisi government in 2013 by lifting the import ban on Georgian agricultural products such as wine and mineral water, which had been in place since 2006, resulting in a 250 million U.S. dollar improvement in the Georgian agricultural trade balance and a strong, eleven per cent growth in the agricultural sector in 2013. Georgia's total wine exports doubled compared to 2012. Over two thirds of its wine exports now go to Russia.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, there is a certain dependence on Russia where agricultural exports are concerned,

12 | Cf. International Republican Institute, "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia. February 3-28, 2015", [http://iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri\\_georgia\\_public\\_2015\\_final\\_0.pdf](http://iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_georgia_public_2015_final_0.pdf) (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

13 | Cf. Davit Sichinava/Laura Thornton, "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of a April 2015 survey carried out for NDI by CRRG Georgia", *National Democratic Institute*, [https://ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_April%202015%20Poll\\_Public%20Political\\_ENG.pdf](https://ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia_April%202015%20Poll_Public%20Political_ENG.pdf) (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

14 | Cf. Ghia Nodia, "Divergent interests: What can and cannot be achieved in Georgian-Russian relations", in: Kornely Kakachia/Michael Ceire (eds.), *Georgian Foreign Policy. The Quest for Sustainable Security*, Tiflis, 2013, [http://kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_37002-1522-1-30.pdf](http://kas.de/wf/doc/kas_37002-1522-1-30.pdf) (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

15 | Cf. Stephan von Cramon-Taubadel, "Georgiens Agrarexporte – Chancen und Risiken", *GET Georgien Newsletter*, No. 2, Jan-Feb 2015, [http://get-georgia.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Newsletter\\_02\\_2015\\_GET\\_Georgien.pdf](http://get-georgia.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Newsletter_02_2015_GET_Georgien.pdf) (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

particularly wine products, but overall there is no serious dependency on the large neighbour, which accounts for only ten per cent of total Georgian exports. In the energy sector too, Russia only plays a minor role as Georgia covers some 90 per cent of its demand for natural gas from Azerbaijan.



The region Kakheti is Georgia's major wine-growing area: Dependency on Russia exists only in the export of agrarian commodities, especially wine products. | Source: Mzuriana, flickr ©①②③④.

The Georgian government not only succeeded in having the trade embargo lifted, but also made progress in the area of civil aviation. Subsequent to the so-called espionage crisis in October 2006, Russia had cut all air links to Georgia. After a brief resumption of flights in March 2008, the entire air traffic came to a halt after the August war. In October 2014, however, regular flights resumed on the Tbilisi to Moscow route, producing a rise in business and private trips from Russia to Georgia. In the first three months of 2015 alone, over 128,000 Russian tourists visited the South-

Caucasian republic.<sup>16</sup> In April 2015, it was finally announced that, with the assistance of Swiss mediators, the civil aviation authorities of Russia and Georgia had come to an agreement on expanding and intensifying the air routes to Russia.<sup>17</sup>

Georgia found out the hard way that there is a limit to the Kremlin's goodwill towards and interest in full normalisation of relations with Georgia when Russian security forces began moving the administrative boundary between Russian-controlled South Ossetia and Georgia into Georgia-controlled territory in the spring and autumn of 2013 and fortifying it with barbed-wire fencing in violation of the 2008 ceasefire agreement.<sup>18</sup> This is proving to be a serious obstacle to the sustainability of the new course pursued by the Georgian government, which did not only strive to normalise relations, but used a conciliatory approach in its dealings with the breakaway provinces at the same time.<sup>19</sup> This entailed Georgian Dream making a gesture through its appointment policy by nominating the conflict resolution expert Paata Zaqareishvili, who had previously come to prominence as one of the harshest critics of the Saakashvili government's approach to dealing with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to the post of Minister for Reintegration. In addition, the ministry responsible for resolving the territorial conflicts, which had been called the "State Ministry for Reintegration" since 2008, was renamed the "State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality" at the beginning of 2014.<sup>20</sup> The de-facto governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had always considered the old title an affront and rejected any dialogue with the state ministry. As far back as March 2013, the Georgian parliament published a bipartisan foreign policy resolution in which it confirmed Georgia's unilateral pledge on non-use of force to

16 | Cf. Georgian National Tourism Authority, "Besucherzahlen nach Herkunftsland (2015)", Georgian National Tourism Authority, Apr 2015, <http://gnta.ge/statistics> (accessed 1 May 2015).

17 | Cf. "Tbilisi, Moscow Agree on Expanding Direct Regular Flights", *Civil Georgia*, 15 Apr 2015, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28197> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

18 | Cf. Shaun Walker, "Russian 'borderisation': barricades erected in Georgia, say EU monitors", *The Guardian*, 23 Oct 2013, <http://theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/23/russia-borderisation-barricades-erected-georgia-eu> (accessed 29 Jun 2015); "EUMM Reports on Resumption of 'Borderisation'", *Civil Georgia*, 29 Nov 2013, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26741> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

19 | Cf. Canan Atilgan/Christina Schmitz, "Die Regierung 'Georgischer Traum': Eine erste Bilanz", KAS-Länderbericht, 19 Nov 2012, [http://kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_32797-1522-1-30.pdf](http://kas.de/wf/doc/kas_32797-1522-1-30.pdf) (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

20 | Cf. "State Ministry for Reintegration Renamed", *Civil Georgia*, 2 Jan 2014, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26842> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

re-establish territorial integrity announced back in 2010 by former President Saakashvili.<sup>21</sup>

**There is no prospect of a resolution to the conflicts in the foreseeable future. Instead fronts have hardened further against the backdrop of Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU.**

Russia's strategic interest is obviously aimed at preventing Georgia from following a course that would see greater rapprochement and further integration with European and Euro-Atlantic structures, and the unresolved territorial conflicts play an important role in this. There is consequently no prospect of a resolution to the conflicts in the foreseeable future; on the contrary, the fronts have hardened further against the backdrop of events in Ukraine and in view of the signing of Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU after the NATO summit in Wales. With the so-called substantial package, Georgia remains just short of the desired Membership Action Plan; but the package will provide support in terms of equipment as well as basic and advanced training, joint exercises, an improvement in interoperability as well as the creation of a NATO training center on Georgian state territory. In response to the decision by NATO, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Viktorovich Lavrov put out an announcement stating that Russia was prepared to respond appropriately to attempts by the West "to drag Georgia into NATO".<sup>22</sup>

#### **AFTER THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA: STATUS OF THE BREAKAWAY PROVINCES**

In light of these Russian threats and due to the country's painful experiences with Moscow, people in Georgia are following Russia's acts of aggression in Ukraine closely and with great concern. Both the Georgian Dream government and the parliamentary opposition parties have condemned the annexation of Crimea and Russian activities in Eastern Ukraine in the harshest terms. Moscow's actions have awakened memories of the 2008 August war among the population. According to a recent survey by the International Republican Institute, 76 per cent of the population consequently now consider Russia the greatest threat to Georgia.<sup>23</sup>

21 | Cf. "Georgia Makes 'Unilateral Pledge' of Non-Use of Force", *Civil Georgia*, 23 Nov 2010, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22880> (accessed 29 Jun 2015); Cf. "Parliament Adopts Bipartisan Resolution on Foreign Policy", *Civil Georgia*, 7 Mar 2013, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25828> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

22 | "Russia to Respond to Attempts to Drag Georgia Into NATO – Lavrov", *Sputnik News*, 18 Feb 2015, <http://sptnkne.ws/jhJ> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

23 | Cf. International Republican Institute, n. 12.



Mikhail Saakashvili at a demonstration of the Euromaidan movement: Numerous members of Georgia's United National Movement party supported the Euro-Majdan movement and Poroshenko's government as a sign of political solidarity. | Source: © Alexey Kudenko, RIA Novosti, picture alliance.

In the conflict with Russia, Georgia has therefore taken Ukraine's side; the opposition party United National Movement has adopted a leading role in this. Party representatives have been given positions in the Ukrainian government by virtue of their reforming expertise. The most prominent case in point is no doubt former President Saakashvili, who was initially made head of Poroshenko's International Advisory Council after the success of Euromaidan and has recently been named Governor of the strategically important Black Sea province of Odessa. In addition, former Georgian Health Minister Alexander Kvitashvili now occupies the same post in Kiev. Similar moves were made by Georgia's former Deputy Minister of Justice Gia Getsadze as well as Georgia's former Deputy Attorney General David Sakvarelidze. They now all serve the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in the same roles. Which consequences this show of political solidarity and Georgian politicians serving the Ukrainian government may have on Russian-Georgian relations, if any, remains to be seen. In any case, Saakashvili's active role no doubt arouses a great deal of suspicion in Russia.

In blatant violation of the 2008 ceasefire agreement, Russia still has considerable numbers of troops stationed in the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and provides these territories with political, military and economic support. In terms of

**In direct connection with the events in Crimea, voices in South Ossetia have been calling for integration into the territory of the Russian Federation, which would effectively mean unification with North Ossetia.**

domestic politics, stability in these areas is only ensured to a limited degree. Without Russian financial support, neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia would be able to survive.<sup>24</sup> In direct connection with the events

in Crimea, there have been voices in South Ossetia calling for integration into the territory of the Russian Federation, which would effectively mean unification with North Ossetia. The majority of Abkhazia's population, by contrast, is against accession to the Russian Federation and supports the course of the de-facto government, which is pursuing national independence in conjunction with a deepening of relations with the countries of the Russian-dominated customs union.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin offered an integration treaty to the self-declared Republic of Abkhazia in mid-October 2014, which was signed later that year as the "Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership" under protest from Tbilisi. Amongst other things, the implementation of this treaty envisages the formation of joint army units, harmonisation of standards to match the regulations of the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union, freedom of movement and a doubling of Moscow's financial support.<sup>25</sup> This will constitute an annexation of Abkhazia into the Russian Federation in all but name. At the same time, an announcement was made that a similar agreement was being sought with South Ossetia; this was finally signed in March 2015 and entails almost total economic and military incorporation into Russia.<sup>26</sup>

The measures to bring the breakaway regions closer to Russia took place only a few months after the Association Agreement between Georgia and the EU had been signed. A number of observers had expected the annexation of the breakaway regions or an escalation of the territorial conflicts by Moscow ahead of the signing of the agreement to deter Georgia from seeking further rapprochement with European structures and institutions by the application of "hard power".<sup>27</sup> The experiences from the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and the events in Ukraine have raised

24 | Cf. Atilgan/Sarjveladze, n. 5.

25 | Cf. "Moscow, Sokhumi Endorse Final Text of New Treaty", *Civil Georgia*, 22 Nov 2014, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27841> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

26 | Cf. "Moscow, Tskhinvali Sign 'Integration Treaty'", *Civil Georgia*, 18 Mar 2015, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28143> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

27 | Cf. Fix, n. 1.

the fear that it is not inconceivable that Moscow might decide on military intervention in Georgia as well. Opposition politicians from Saakashvili's "United National Movement" party in particular share this concern. It has been pointed out, for instance, that the Russian staging posts in South Ossetia are only 250 kilometers from the Russian military base in the Armenian town of Gyumri. Concerns on the Georgian side have been fuelled further by reports about Russia planning the construction of a link road through the Greater Caucasus connecting Dagestan, which is part of the Russian Federation, and East Georgia.<sup>28</sup> A Russian advance from South Ossetia or Dagestan would not only split Georgia in two, it would also cut the main transport link and the energy transit corridor between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. Having said that, a military intervention by Russia in Georgia to prevent further European and Euro-Atlantic rapprochement is currently the least likely scenario. At the same time, such imagined scenarios demonstrate the degree to which Georgia feels threatened in its existence by Russia.

### **RUSSIA'S "SOFT POWER" APPROACHES IN GEORGIA**

Russia's "soft power" approaches, in fact, pose a far more realistic threat. A systematic campaign to influence public opinion could, over time, prove an effective tool for undermining the fundamental social consensus on a foreign policy oriented towards the EU and the USA. There are various allies whom the Kremlin can engage in this endeavour.

As part of this approach, Russia provides selective support to NGOs with obvious names such as "Eurasian Choice", "Eurasian Institute" and "Slavic World" as well as to media such as "NewsGeorgia.ru" in order to effectively disseminate anti-Western propaganda and establish a counter-discourse, which is based on the rejection of Western liberal values and places emphasis on traditional social values, conservatism and Orthodox Christianity instead. The Western world and its purported values are vilified as decadent, depraved and immoral. It is frequently contrasted with an imaginary sound and pure Orthodox world, led by Russia, which is painted as being morally superior. These organisations also regularly disseminate political conspiracy theories. Aside from minor nuances, the basic tone and the methods the organisations

28 | Cf. Valery Dzutsev, "Experts See Planned Russian Road Connecting Dagestan to Georgia as Threat to Latter", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11/223, 15 Dec 2014, <http://goo.gl/sCsiLq> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

employ and their target groups are identical. Most formats are aimed at poorly educated sections of the population and at the rural population in the provinces. One exception is the organisation "Eurasian Choice", which addresses educated sections of the population and which also commissions reputable-looking surveys. The online portal "NewsGeorgia.ru", for its part, attempts to disseminate a positive image of Russia in Georgia through biased reporting and Russian-language media content. In isolation, the influence of these organisations and media on public discourse in Georgia can be considered marginal for now, but their impact will increase if the Association Agreement with the EU and the necessary legislative harmonisation were to bring about challenges and fail to produce tangible improvements in living conditions. The pro-Russian organisations have stepped up their activities noticeably since the agreement was signed.<sup>29</sup>



Inauguration of a church in Rustavi: In Georgia, the Orthodox Church regularly intervenes in societal and political decisions. This leads some to call it Moscow's "fifth column". | Source: Mzuriana, flickr ©©©©.

There is a real danger of the Patriarchate being exploited to further the anti-Western discourse, which has been relatively low key to date. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia having gained independence as a nation state, the Orthodox Church has

29 | Interview with high-ranking employees of the Georgian National Security Council (anonymised) on the subject of "Activities of pro-Russian NGOs and media in Georgia" conducted by Florian C. Feyerabend on 4 May 2015.



represented the most highly respected and influential institution in Georgian society. Religion also plays an important part in day-to-day decision-making for 83 per cent of Georgians.<sup>30</sup>

The Church is also an influential political actor, interfering proactively in social and political decision-making and in part promoting backward-looking norms in the process. This has become evident, for instance, in the conflict between the Orthodox Church and civil society organisations promoting the rights of religious, ethnic and sexual minorities. This culminated in violent attacks on LGBTI activists on 17 May 2013, in which priests of the Orthodox Church had a major part.<sup>31</sup> The Church also played a controversial role in the discussion about the antidiscrimination bill. It has actively opposed adoption of the bill, which is important for further rapprochement with the EU, and pushed through changes in the wording.<sup>32</sup> The Church is particularly intransigent with respect to ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. While organised radical groups such as the “Union of Orthodox Parents” are not officially affiliated to the Church, it condones them disseminating radical positions in the name of the Church.

Some observers therefore describe the Church rather indiscriminately as “Moscow’s Fifth Column”,<sup>33</sup> but this does not reflect the complexity of relations between the autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate, and it ignores the existence of moderate sections within the Georgian Church. It cannot be denied, however, that the decidedly illiberal and anti-Western statements by Church representatives represent a challenge to efforts to adapt Georgia further to European structures. Surveys show a discrepancy between the consistent commitment to Europe on the part of the population on the one hand and a strongly conservative and traditional value system accepted by many Georgians on the other. The Church could act as a vehicle of change where values are concerned, a change that

**It cannot be denied that the decidedly illiberal and anti-Western statements by Church representatives represent a challenge to efforts to adapt Georgia further to European structures.**

30 | Cf. Sichinava/Thornton, n. 13.

31 | Cf. Amnesty International, “Georgia: Homophobic violence mars Tbilisi Pride event”, 17 May 2013, <http://amnestyusa.org/news/news-item/georgia-homophobic-violence-mars-tbilisi-pride-event> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

32 | Cf. “Georgia’s Orthodox Church Opposes Antidiscrimination Bill”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 29 Apr 2014, <http://rferl.org/content/georgias-orthodox-church-opposes-antidiscrimination-bill/25366250.html> (accessed 29 Jun 2015).

33 | Cecire, n. 1.

will be indispensable in the course of the rapprochement with Europe. However, it has not accepted this role to date and is clinging to a pan-Orthodox normative mindset shared with Russia.

Russia's most reliable potential partners are to be found in the Georgian party landscape. One fundamental problem in this area is the fact that the "United National Movement" had to some degree monopolised the pro-Western narrative under the Saakashvili government. European and Euro-Atlantic rapprochement is therefore linked to Saakashvili in people's mind. To political groupings and parties wishing to mobilise voters on an anti-Saakashvili platform, an anti-Western discourse therefore has a certain appeal. However, to date only the two parties Democratic Movement – United Georgia of the Rose Revolution activist and former Chairperson of the Parliament Nino Burjanadze and the All-Georgian Patriotic Alliance openly take a pro-Russian stance. Both parties form part of the non-parliamentary opposition. In the 2013 presidential elections, Burjanadze, who had stood out through her homophobic remarks, came in third with over ten per cent. According to recent surveys, the two parties could jointly count on support from up to 19 per cent of voters.<sup>34</sup> As is the case for the pro-Russian NGOs, Burjanadze's party at least is suspected of receiving funding from Moscow.

## **OUTLOOK**

Three years on from when the Georgian Dream coalition took over, tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi have eased to a certain extent. There have also been modest advances and achievements in some areas in the bilateral dialogue with Russia. There are, however, limits to a sustained normalisation or fundamental improvement of Georgian-Russian relations. As long as Russia continues to use military power and political pressure as its main foreign policy instruments in its dealings with Georgia, the relationship between the two countries will remain marred by confrontation, distrust and fear. As long as Russia does not accept the principle of territorial integrity and the right of every country to decide its own future freely, there will be no basis of trust for normalisation.

34 | Cf. International Republican Institute, n. 12.

Until the new Tbilisi government came in just under three years ago, the European countries above all were also convinced that it was a lack of political will that prevented a resolution to the Russian-Georgian confrontation. The events of the last few years, however, have shown that Russian policies lack a cooperative element, that Russia is not coming across as an attractive partner to its neighbouring states, and that Moscow is predominantly focused on territorially defined spheres of influence. Consequently, Russia's strategic interest with respect to Georgia is primarily aimed at preventing a course of further rapprochement and integration with European and Euro-Atlantic structures. Where the breakaway provinces are concerned, it is therefore unlikely that Moscow will show any readiness to make concessions, particularly against the backdrop of events in Ukraine and following the signing of Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU and the outcome of the NATO summit in Wales. On the contrary, the Kremlin is now also making attempts to undermine the fundamental pro-Western foreign policy consensus still backed by the majority of the Georgian population by employing means of "soft power". Europe needs to offer Georgia solid prospects as a clear sign of its appreciation of Georgia's decision to ally itself with the Euro-Atlantic community.