GEORGIA'S GEOPOLITICAL LANDMARKS: IS THERE A SHIFT?

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Introduction

On 30 October, 2004, we all learned that the NATO Council endorsed the Individual Partnership Action Plan between NATO and Georgia. The diplomatic communities of many countries assessed this as a serious step toward Georgia's integration into NATO. No specific dates were cited; the NATO Secretary-General who visited Tbilisi several days after the announcement cautioned our leaders that they had to cope single-handedly with the gravest of our problems—separatism. The public, however, is inclined to believe Mikhail Saakashvili, who says that Georgia will join NATO during his presidential term.

The country has already started readjusting its armed forces to the NATO standards. Under the agreements with the United States, by the end of 2004 there were 850 Georgian servicemen stationed in Iraq as part of the coalition forces (this is a large figure for a country with an army of 14,000-15,000). In so doing, Georgia is demonstrating its intention to shift its foreign policy vector westward; for over two centuries, until the end of the 20th century, the country (wittingly or unwittingly) was north-oriented.

It should be said, however, that starting in the mid-1990s, the country's leaders have been insisting on a multi-vectoral foreign policy, which means that the country has abandoned its orientation only toward Moscow. Diplomatic efforts in this direction never slackened, yet (for objective and subjective reasons) the country's real integration into Europe (by this I mean integration into NATO and the EU) looked like a distant and pretty unrealistic goal. The country had to concentrate on its own survival; it needed (and still needs) energy fuels and had to depend (and still has to depend) on Russia for them.

The new Georgian leaders brought to power by the "Rose Revolution" of November 2003 are obviously pro-Western. All political forces, including the large opposition parties, agree with this, or do not oppose this course.

The coming geopolitical shift in the key South Caucasian state poses the question: Why is a small country (Georgia in our case) forced to seek strategic partners far from its borders? Is its NATO partnership real? In other words: Will it be welcome in the West?

To correctly identify a country's geopolitical goals and hence its future, its past must be analyzed and put into the broad geographical context. This alone will make it possible to discover the geopolitical code on which the country's foreign policy rests; to be more exact, the geopolitical code determines the country's interests, as well as identifies the threats to these interests and the nature of possible responses to these threats.

With a small country, the geopolitical code normally remains at the local level and suggests strategic assessments of its neighbors when shaping its foreign policy. Only the world superpowers operate with geopolitical codes at the global level. A small country, however, cannot remain indifferent to the global geopolitical situation and, especially, to the superpowers' interests and designs. While trying to adjust itself to global geopolitics, a small country can find its niche on the world arena to remain safe or to survive.

Alexander Rondeli, a Georgian expert in foreign policies of small countries, has pointed out: "No matter how flexible, no matter how promptly it responds to changes, the foreign policy of any small country should have a strategic aim and should make its strategic choice. This means that it receives support from some states and is opposed by others—a very precarious and dangerous situation."[1]

Will Georgia cope with this risky task? Time alone will tell; a scholar has to look at what prompted such developments.

[1] A. Rondeli, *Malaia strana v mezhdunarodnoy sisteme,* Metsniereba Publishers, Tbilisi, 2003, pp. 79-80 (in Georgian).

Historical Background

Adoption of Christianity as the state religion in the first half of the 4th century was a deliberate choice of Western orientation represented by Byzantium. Until that time, Eastern Georgia, the core of the Georgian statehood and nation, was politically and culturally dominated by the East: Sassanian Iran and Zoroastrianism.

Christianity brought about a cultural revolution in Georgia: it acquired its own written language, an original one based on phonetics, to translate the Bible into Georgian. The canonical Georgian translation helped create a common literary language across the country and a single nation.[2] Throughout the Middle Ages, Georgia remained the easternmost part of the Christian world and regarded itself as the Eastern outpost of Europe.

Speaking at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 28 January, 2004, President of Georgia Mikhail Saakashvili pointed out: "Today, Georgia has stepped on the home-bound road; it is re-integrating with Europe, with which it has common values and a common history."[3] This put our country's public opinion in a nutshell, most of the population of which looks at Europe as a "common home."

As distinct from many (but not all) post-Soviet countries, Georgia as a state (or several states) has existed on the same territory under the same name (Kartli-Sakartvelo) for at least two millennia. Throughout the late Middle Ages, the Georgian states preserved the inherited power of the local Christian rulers, many of whom wished to unite the country under their power. These dreams never came true because of the geopolitical realities (feudal disunity largely preserved by the efforts of the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia, two neighboring regional powers) which determined the landmarks.

By the end of the 18th century, the Russian Empire had entrenched itself fairly well in the Northern Caucasus and on the Northern Black Sea coast to be ready to move further south. It needed a South Caucasian ally. In this way the interests of Russia and Eastern Georgia (the united kingdom Kartli-Kakhetia with Tbilisi as its capital) coincided. By that time, recognized by the rulers of other Georgian kingdoms and princedoms as the most important part of the country, Eastern Georgia had become virtually independent of Persia torn apart by feudal strife (it had been its vassal for two centuries). Kartli-Kakhetia needed a strong ally and patron to help it move further away from Persia and protect it against the inroads of the Caucasian (mainly Daghestanian) mountain peoples. Their small groups, who invaded the Georgian valleys, threatened the country's political, economic, and demographic stability (they frequently abducted children and sold them as slaves in the Ottoman Empire). The agreement on an alliance signed in 1783 (the so-called Georgievsk Treaty [after the name of the fortress in which it was signed]) established Russia's protectorate over Kartli-Kakhetia, the sovereignty of which was thus limited (the state was deprived of its independent foreign policy), yet guaranteed inherited power and self-administration.[4]

[2] See: R. Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia: Space, Society, Politics,* UCL Press, London, 1995.

[3] *24 Saati* newspaper, 29 January, 2004.

[4] Art 6 of the document said: "His Serene Highness Czar Irakly Teymurazovich and his house of heirs and descendants shall under all conditions preserve power in the kingdoms of Kartali and Kakhetia with their own domestic administration, court of justice, punishment and tax collection given under His Serene Highness' will and for his profit" (*Georgievskiy traktat. Issledovanie, dokumenty, fotokopii V. Macharadze,* Khelovneba Publishers, Tbilisi, 1983, p. 76).

It was in this manner that, late in the 18th century, the Georgian political elite shifted its geopolitical orientation from the East to the North. It was an indirect European orientation: direct ties with the center and west of Europe being limited by the political and geographic realities of the times. Georgia had access to Western and Central Europe through the territory of the Ottoman Empire (if we exclude Russia from this discussion). And although it always had its daggers drawn with Persia, a source of trouble for Georgia, the Ottoman Empire was an equally undesirable partner for [Eastern] Georgia. The latter made several aborted attempts at attracting the attention of France, Spain, and the Vatican in the early 18th century, yet it was too far away, too hard to reach, too small, and too poor to be worth the trouble of the European powers. They would hardly agree to shed the blood of their own soldiers or mercenaries over Georgia.

Enlarging Russia, however, had its military-strategic interests in Georgia: it could use its territory as a toehold for southward movement. In 1813, under the Gulistan Treaty with defeated Persia, Russia enlarged its territory to the River Arax; its stronger positions in Georgia allowed it to pincer the still unconquered part of the Northern Caucasus. At that time, civilizational proximity was a strong factor of public relations. The fact that during the Byzantine Empire the Georgians belonged to the same Christian branch (Orthodoxy) as the Russians was insistently driven home; the argument survived until Soviet times and was used to "strengthen the friendship of nations."

The quasi-allied relations between Russia and Eastern Georgia survived less than two decades. In 1801, Emperor Alexander I exploited the squabble at the court in Tbilisi, annulled the Georgievsk Treaty and annexed Eastern Georgia; during the Russo-Turkish wars of the 19th century, Russia conquered Western and part of Southern Georgia and deported the local monarchs and their families. The autocephalous status of the Georgian Christian Orthodox Church was destroyed; imperial administration—more efficient and ruthless—replaced the local bureaucrats. To make control over the empire's outskirts (Georgia was one of them) easier, the empire mixed ethnic groups by encouraging emigration of the local people (Georgian Muslims and Abkhazians) and immigration (Germans from Württemberg; Russians from central Russia, Armenians and Greeks from the eastern vilayets of the Ottoman Empire, etc.).

Russian expansion brought some objectively positive results too. After four centuries of disunity, practically all the Georgian lands were united within one empire and acquired certain Western and European features. These factors, in turn, gave birth to Georgian nationalism, something that St. Petersburg had not expected and did not like. It would prefer to see the Southern Caucasus Russified, very much after the pattern of the Northern Caucasus. As part of the empire, Georgia could not identify its geopolitical preferences.

The Georgians and other large South Caucasian nations got the chance after World War I. Within the short period of two or three years, in 1918-1920/21, three independent republics—Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia—came into being in the Southern Caucasus in the context of a temporary imperial vacuum created by the neighboring superpowers' lack of interest (Russia, bogged down in the Civil War; defeated Turkey, struggling to its feet and beating off Greek attacks; and Persia, dealing with the deathroes of the Qajar dynasty). The new states never acted together and were easy prey for Russia, which returned to the region as a country of Bolsheviks.

At that time geopolitical choice (by which I mean the choice of the patron country) was a limited one. For a short while, until November 1918, Georgia was looking at Germany, then it turned its gaze to the U.K. The former lost the war, while the latter lost interest in the Southern Caucasus with the oil of Baku as its only attraction. Great Britain preferred to concentrate on the Middle East with its easily accessible oil and no serious rivals. In vain, independent Georgia tried to attract the attention of the European powers and join the League of Nations. It, and the neighboring republics, were forced to become part of the forming Soviet Union.

Formally, under the Soviet constitution, the Georgian S.S.R., like all other Union republics, was a "sovereign state" with its own foreign ministry. In fact, none of them (including Ukraine and Byelorussia, which were U.N. members) could play any independent role on the world arena.

It was only after the Soviet Union's collapse, 70 years later, that Georgia regained its chance to identify its geopolitical priorities. Under Gamsakhurdia (1990-1991), it remained an unrecognized state with vague geopolitical aims. Its foreign policy acquired clearer features when Georgia was recognized by the world community late in 1991, and especially after it joined international organizations (the U.N., OSCE, etc.) in 1992.

The Political-Geographical Context

Georgia borders on Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. It is the only South Caucasian and Central Asian country with access to the World Ocean. The main transit sea-bound arteries of Armenia and Azerbaijan cross its territory. The main export pipeline for Caspian oil from Azerbaijan to Turkey will also cross Georgia.

Armenia, which has no diplomatic and other relations with its Turkic neighbors, Azerbaijan and Turkey, has to use Georgian territory to maintain contacts with Russia and Europe. Turkey and Azerbaijan, in turn, also have to use Georgian territory to cooperate (or use Iran as a transit state). The United States, which has to keep its armed forces in Central Asia to carry out the counter-terrorist struggle, uses Georgia as a transit state.

Late in the 20th century, this added supra-regional value to Georgia's political-geographic location. I have already written that late in the 18th century too, imperial Russia was interested in Georgia as a geographical unit which provided a toehold for southward movement. At that time, Georgian territory was of regional value: in the Middle East, Russia was competing with Persia and the Ottoman Empire rather than with European powers. British interest in the Caucasus as a whole and in Georgia during its short-lived independence in 1918 was likewise short. It was Kemal Atatürk's Turkey which stood opposed to Russia in the Caucasus. In 1921, the two countries agreed to divide the Southern Caucasus between themselves.

When Georgia acquired independence once more in 1991, Turkey, which suddenly found itself delivered of its most dangerous enemy, the Soviet Union, tried to spread its influence to the entire Southern Caucasus and Central Asia only to discover that its financial and economic resources were not enough. They were sufficient to master the Georgian market though. Nearly the entire post-Soviet space, Georgia included, proved an ideal market for Turkish consumer goods and foodstuffs. It was the heyday of Turkish industry.

In Russia, Georgia borders on the Krasnodar Territory with its predominantly Russian population and its multiethnic North Caucasian republics, the local elites of which gradually gained political weight during Soviet times. The Kremlin managed to keep them in check for a while by inciting them against each other. It looks as though the bi-ethnic "mini-republics" (Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Checheno-Ingushetia) were set up with this aim in view. In addition, there was a considerable Russian element in each of them. Daghestan, the republic with numerous ethnic groups and no stable sources of money, completely depended on Moscow. Early in the 1990s, to reduce ethnic pressure in the Northern Caucasus, the Russian Federation pointed to Georgia as the main troublemaker.

The political situation of the late 20th century suggests that early in the 1920s, the Kremlin had long-term intentions when it gave autonomous rights to the future irredenta. To support the point, researchers normally refer to several autonomies: the Ossets on the southern slopes of the Caucasus (South Ossetia), while there had always been North Ossetia in the Northern Caucasus;[5] and the Armenians living on the territory which was once the Karabakh Khanate (Nagorny Karabakh), while there was Armenian S.S.R. This is as good explanation as any of the presence of ethnoterritorial autonomies. We cannot exclude the possibility that sometimes no strategic interests were involved and that the autonomies were a stopgap used for short-term political reasons.

[5] For more detail, see: R. Gachechiladze, op. cit., pp. 86-88.

Political-geographic realities (PGR) of even a relatively limited scale, having emerged in a specific territory and, through this territory, in the mental maps and hearts of the people, are very tenacious. All attempts to change them and adjust to new PGRs of a larger scale can threaten empires, to say nothing of small states.[6]

The ethno-territorial conflicts in Georgia—in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—occur along its border with Russia. There are larger ethnic minorities in Georgia which create far fewer problems: they live fairly far from the Russian border.[7]

Even though Georgia's policies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were not free of errors, Russia's support is the main factor of the separatists' temporary success. During the hostilities in Abkhazia in 1992-1993, this support was not obvious even though the Russian military base in Gudauta helped set up the Abkhazian air force and the navy. Numerous North Caucasian volunteers (Cossacks and people of local nationalities—Adighes, Cherkesses, Kabardins, and Chechens) easily crossed the border. They were all taught to believe Georgia was their main enemy. Shamil Basaev, the notorious Chechen militant, and his comrades-in-arms acquired their military skills by fighting side by side with Russian Cossacks against Georgia. Later, they used these skills against Russia. As a result, over half of the Abkhazian population (up to 300,000 people), mainly Georgians, were driven out of the republic. Most of them are still refugees or temporarily displaced persons.

In the latter half of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century, support from the north became more obvious. The decisions of CIS summits on severing economic ties with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatists were consistently ignored; they were offered favorable border-crossing conditions (the populations of the two breakaway territories essentially do not need a visa to cross into Russia, while in most of Georgia visas were introduced); Russian citizenship was granted to the absolute majority of those who live in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, while Russian officials speak of the need to protect their interests, etc.

This has created a negative background for relations between the two countries and provokes corresponding public opinion in Georgia. People tend to suspect our northern neighbor of even non-existent sins. This affects international relations as well.

Is Georgia Reassessing Its Geopolitical Code?

The geopolitical code of any country is determined by its *interests* compared with the interests of its neighbors and the *threats to its interests.* A small country, naturally, should rely on other states with similar or non-contradicting interests to formulate responses to the threats.

Today, none of Georgia's neighbors poses a real danger to it. The time of Ottoman conquers, Daghestanian inroads, and Russian expansion has passed. Even the threat of "pan-Turkism" exploited as a bugaboo by certain "highly educated people" living to the south and north of Georgia can hardly scare anyone. Turkey is a civilized state which wants to become part of Europe; it abandoned its intention to conquer the Caucasus and Turkestan, which it betrayed back in 1918. A contemporary state ruled by law is Russia's aim. All reasonable Moscow politicians know that to restore a sort of Soviet Union

[6] For example, in late 1990 the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Georgia abolished the autonomy of South Ossetia in response to its own attempt to abolish its own status of autonomous region in a unilateral effort to raise its political status. To establish peace and restore the country's territorial integrity in the changed geopolitical conditions, Georgia will probably have to restore South Ossetia's former autonomous status or even raise it.

[7] The 2004 events in Ajaria are a good example of the geographical factor's importance. Russia obviously did not want to fan the crisis of power in Ajaria (there was no ethnic conflict there—the absolute majority was Georgian) because of its geographic location. Ajaria, which borders on Turkey, has no common border with Russia. The Ajarian ruler, however, tried to add legitimacy to his claims by referring to the feudal past of his ancestors (sic!), while resisting Georgia, which was restoring constitutional order in the region. He asked Moscow for support, but it preferred to give him asylum.

under market conditions is economically unprofitable; it is impossible to destroy the world political order without crippling Russia's interests. Azerbaijan and Armenia hardly feel politically threatened by Georgia and they prefer to maintain friendly relations with it. In fact, Georgia has already reached a consensus on all territorial issues and has achieved recognition of the immutability of the present borders.

Still, Georgia is aware that its national interests are threatened. It has to seek a response to such threats.

Regrettably, Russia presents the main threat to Georgia, even though a certain civilizational kinship between the Russians and Georgians exists (rooted in shared Christian Orthodoxy), and the two nations are tied by cultural contacts. Today, these contacts are still quite strong: Russian is still taught in Georgian schools; there are Russian-language newspapers, Russian theaters, radio and TV programs, even though the number of ethnic Russians in the country is negligible. In Soviet times, there were more Russians in Georgia than Georgians in Russia; today Russian culture in Georgia functions mainly for the Georgians (there are also many Georgians in the cultural and economic spheres of the RF). Personal relations between the two ethnic groups have survived.

High politics, however, national security considerations, and military-political aspects force official Tbilisi to treat relations between the two states with caution and not to succumb to "friendly feelings." For some strange reason, two "civilizational sisters"—Russia and Georgia—have different political interests.

It seems that Russia has so far failed to realize that Georgia is a foreign state; to a great extent this is due to Russia's historical memory. Georgia is treated as a closer country than Azerbaijan, the Central Asian republics, or even Armenia (tied to Russia by political and ethnic threads). (According to the 2002 population census, there are 1,100,000 Armenians in Russia, two-fold fewer than in Armenia.) There is another factor: not only the right-wing great power patriots, but also many others remember that Stalin, who did a lot to strengthen Russian statehood and restore imperial thinking, was a Georgian. This should have bred "fraternal feelings." Instead, it breeds "paternalism:" Russia finds it hard to accept the thought that the "ungrateful Georgians" refuse to follow Russia's guidance.

States are guided by political pragmatism; Georgia wants to restore its control over the two separatist regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—which can be effectively done by peaceful means. Moscow's policies of the past fifteen years leave no doubt that it wants to preserve the status quo, that is, to keep the conflicts burning. We can agree that Russia, burdened by the Chechen issue, finds it hard to address ethnic problems in the neighboring country. Tbilisi, in turn, sees that instead of trying to settle the conflicts, Moscow is working hard to support the separatists.

Georgia wants to become a transit country for Caspian hydrocarbons to diversify the sources of energy fuels and become less dependent on Russia's monopoly in this sphere. Russia did everything possible to oppose this: it is one of the largest gas exporters to Turkey and one of the largest oil suppliers. It needs no rivals.

To protect our interests, we need a small, mobile, and well-equipped army. Georgia's efforts to achieve this were supported by the NATO countries and partly by Ukraine. In fact, Georgia, a Black Sea country, received nothing when the Soviet Navy was divided.

Tbilisi does not need foreign troops and bases on its territory, especially if the military doctrine of the foreign state says nothing about protecting Georgian interests. There are Russian military bases on our territory. At the Istanbul OSCE summit of 1999, Russia promised to withdraw its bases—today it is doing its best to postpone this.[8] Russia insists that it needs eleven years to remove the bases and demands

[8] According to a Russian military expert "Russia's geostrategy in the South requires that the problem of the Russian military bases in the independent Transcaucasian states (Georgia and Armenia.—*R.G.*) be specified. We should strive to preserve Russia's military presence in this region… It could have received a firmer basis had Russia made a weightier and more efficient contribution to settling the conflicts in the Transcaucasus. The situation, however, is developing in the direction of squeezing Russia out of this vitally important region" (V.L. Petrov, *Geopolitika Rossii: vozrozhdenie ili gibel?* Veche Publishers, Moscow, 2003, p. 185).

huge contributions to pay for it. Official Tbilisi, however, is convinced that three years is more than enough (almost six years have already passed).

Russia's repeated refusal to take practical measures to regulate relations is causing concern in the Georgian capital. For example, Russia signed and ratified agreements on friendship and cooperation with most of the CIS countries, yet the agreement with Georgia signed on 3 February, 1994 and ratified by the Georgian parliament has not yet been ratified by the RF State Duma. For several years now the sides have been discussing a new text to be signed (probably) in 2005.

The above says that concentrating on Russia alone is becoming less and less productive and that Georgia must revise its geopolitical code. This means that it needs closer cooperation with other countries and military-political blocs (primarily NATO). Tbilisi is aware that the country should address its domestic issues itself and hopes that other forces may help it to do this much more effectively than a neighboring power with no interest in this.

Objectively, Georgia's orientation toward the West and the Western life style should force our people to revise their attitude toward labor, discipline, observing the law, human rights, etc. The nation should learn that the road to Europe is a hard one and that theoretically EU membership is possible only if we revise our values. This has not yet been widely discussed in our country; the public has not yet addressed the issue of our foreign policy orientation. This will inevitably be done in the future.

Partnership with NATO is a fairly long process, yet granted both sides want it, Georgia will eventually join the bloc. If our country fulfills all the necessary conditions, the West will welcome it! Much depends on international developments though. On the eve of 9/11, nobody expected the changes that finally took place. Two Black Sea countries (Rumania and Bulgaria) were rapidly admitted to NATO in the context of the counter-terrorist struggle.

The events that took place in Ukraine late in 2004 may affect the relations between Georgia, another Black Sea country, and NATO if this key East European nation moves toward closer relations with the North Atlantic structures.

Conclusion

Peaceful relations between neighbors may take different forms ranging from equal partnership to unequal partnership and then to complete avoidance of partnership ("cold peace").

Georgia wants to become an equal partner for all its neighbors, the former metropolitan country included. In fact, we have already achieved this with most of our neighbors (Armenia and Azerbaijan). Even huge (by Caucasian standards) Turkey respects our right to independent policies.

Theoretically, our partnership with Moscow is also equal, yet its present state (Russia's virtual support of the breakaway Georgian regions; Russian citizenship for their populations, the Russian military bases, etc.) makes Georgia de facto an unequal partner, something which our country cannot accept. To balance our foreign relations and to acquire more reliable guarantees of our independence and territorial integrity, we have to look for partners far from our borders.

Georgia looks at "cold peace" as the least desirable alternative of its relations with Russia; it is hardly possible too: our economic, cultural, and personal relations will go on.

It seems that the Russian establishment is quite capable of steering our relations toward equal partnership. Russia, as a great power, will profit from this too. In any case, Georgia's multi-vectoral foreign policy does not boil down to rejecting its orientation toward Moscow. A possible geopolitical shift may prove less painful for all the parties concerned.