

Perspectives of Future Russo-Georgian War: Real Possibility or Speculation

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Abstract

The war which outbroke in Ukraine recently made the loud headlines in newspapers and media. Europe observed unimaginable act of violence in the form of war and the myth about the end of war culture has collapsed. EU became actively involved in creation of initiatives aimed at restoring peace, hosting refugees and punishing the wrongdoers. At the same time, other future potential victim states like Moldova and Georgia started to search for protection.

In Jun 2022 all three states, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova applied for the fast track to European Union which became the symbol of liberal, free world where the states could be protected from Russian soft power influence. However, after the EU decision only two of three candidates were granted the fast track: Ukraine and Moldova. Georgia was given recommendations for further considerations.

The article aims to explore what are the possible chances for more future tensions between Russia and Georgia who just had a war a decade ago in 2008. How probable is the aggression from Russian federation after the denial of fast track? Serious concern rises as we remember the statement of Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that required withdrawal of Bucharest Summit decision on Ukraine and Georgia as future members of NATO. This 2021 December statement was followed by war in Ukraine. Does this mean we should also expect military actions in Georgia?

Keywords: trust, war, possibility

1. Introduction

Since the August War of 2008, Georgia not once confirmed its western course. Country's European path is confirmed by national constitution. In addition, in 2014 the will of Europe to consider eastern partners as future members of the union was reflected in Article 49 which states: "Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as well as any other European country, have a European perspective and can apply for EU membership in compliance with the principles of democracy, respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights, minority rights and ensuring the rule of rights".¹ Additionally, since 2016 Associated Agreement with EU started to enter into force (signed in 2014) which made Georgian-EU relations even more intertwined. Combination of Associated Agreement with the visa free travel granted to Georgian citizens, made it clear that small post-soviet country was making decisive steps to enter European Union family. Therefore, it was not surprising that 2021 at the summit held in Batumi, three countries: Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine signed a declaration to reaffirm the western course of three states.² Neither it was unexpected when Georgia followed Ukraine's steps in fast-track application in 2022 since Georgians felt related to the war situation unfolding in Ukraine. It was 2008 war which left Georgia with 20% of occupied territories and groups of war refugees. It was considered that the fast-track agreement could be a mechanism for self-defense in case of future aggression attempted by the government of Russia.

On June 17, 2022 Moldova and Ukraine were granted candidate status immediately. This process will be delayed for Georgia until recommended conditions will be met in all three criteria political criteria, economic criteria, and the ability of the country to assume the obligations of EU membership (EU *acquis*). According to the President of European Commission Ursula von der Leyen “Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia share the strong and legitimate aspiration of joining the European Union. Today, we are sending them a clear signal of support in their aspirations, even as they face challenging circumstances”.³ Even though the words were encouraging and in the same speech it was confirmed that Georgia along with Ukraine and Moldova belong, in the due time, to European Union, still, it became evident that the European family still views Georgia as a country with significant Russian influence.

2. Trust Issues

It is widely considered that any collaboration should be based on trust concept between the partners. In the article “Drivers and Performance Outcomes of Trust in International Strategic Alliances: The Role of Organizational Complexity” Matthew J. Robson, Constantine S. Katsikeas and Daniel C. Bello assert that “Trust between partners has become a key construct in interfirm relationship management”.⁴ Moreover, according to their theoretical model framework, the size of the alliance has its impact on such variable, as trust “inter partner trust is positively associated with alliance performance, this relationship becomes stronger when alliance size declines”.⁵ The article aims to attribute the decision of EU to the lack of trust in political partnership with Georgia and to show that the possible hypothetical reasoning for distrust might have been seeing Georgia as a land which still is perceived as the entity under Russian influence. On the other hand, article will focus on how all this inspired increase in otherwise mild Russian activity towards Georgia. Trust in the times of crisis is important on organizational level since as Mishra mentions, trust issue within the organization acquires especial meaning in the times of crisis.⁶ However, Golin believes that trust can be process, as well as a result: “It is something that you will gain in time, and it is of major impact during difficult periods of change or crisis”.⁷ If we consider the decision of European Union to give recommendations to Georgia on its way to candidate status and fast-track delay, can it illustrate the issue of trust? And if so, how can Russia use this for its own purpose?

Since the very beginning of Georgia’s European course, there were high-ranking politicians making sharp comments about Georgia’s western politics. For example, minister of foreign affairs of Russia. Sergei Lavrov was always making negative comments about Georgia’s pursuit towards NATO and EU. “A man who issued orders to commit war crimes which resulted in thousands of deaths of peaceful civilians cannot be viewed by Russia as a partner (about former president Saakashvili)”⁸ and when talking about Georgian course towards NATO, He added: “There is a feeling that NATO again needs frontline states to justify its existence.”⁹ Similarly, Lavrov made sharp comments regarding the wish to self-defend and stop NATO advancement: “the non-stop process to drag Georgia into NATO”. “Naturally, if these measures start to take practical shape – evidently, this process has already begun – we will take measures to prevent negative effects of these developments.”¹⁰ Sergei Lavrov is one among Russian politicians who expressed negative attitude towards Georgian western politics claiming that Georgia was a puppet in big western hand. Big western conspiracy aiming to overthrow Russian dominance in the region. This is the narrative long articulated among the mass media from Russian side.

After the events of 2022 which left Georgia without a chance to get fast-track candidate status, it also signaled Russia’s high political establishment that south Caucasian country was slowed in its process of European integration. Or such was the interpretation. With loud remarks made about Transnistria and Moldova on March 9, Russian minister of foreign affairs declared: “Transnistria and Russia support direct dialogue but judging by statements made by President Maia Sandu and her team, they do not want such dialogue, as they are being directed by the US and EU to reject talks,” Lavrov said: “Apparently, they are seeking a non-diplomatic solution to the Transnistria problem.”¹¹ It seems that the Russian politics towards the western-minded countries is as negative as before. Western oriented countries are automatically understood as a threat by Russian policymakers.

3. Rapprochement Attempts

Recently another Russian initiative was offered to Georgia. New negotiation format 3+3 which was thought as a good option for solving the Transcaucasian issues. The idea was to include Georgia in this format offered by Russian federation. Simultaneously, according to Lavrov, this could be a good option for Georgians to include themselves in this format; “We asked our Turkish and Azerbaijani friends, Armenia, to explain to their Georgian neighbors the benefits of joining the “3+3” format for them, as for all of us. Such participation will oblige them nothing in terms of political positions,” Lavrov said.¹² As innocent as it sound from a far, inclusion in these type of formats presented dangerous attempt to spread Russian control in the region and strengthen its sphere of influence. US defense secretary Lloyd Austin mentioned “3+3 format” in the South Caucasus. I would just say that Russia, which currently occupies 20% of Georgia’s territory, should focus on honoring its 2008 cease-fire commitments before promoting any new discussion platforms.¹³ Common economic relations already linked Georgia, Turkey and Azerbaijan for more than a decade now, so, obviously 3+3 format would be just an attempt

to re-introduce Russia in a bigger regional picture at the same time, delicately. However, the attempt was not limited only to the offer of 3+3 format. More and more south Caucasus witnesses moves of the Russian federation which tense the situation in the region. More concretely, Russian federation triggers the civil unrest in Georgia by so-called attempt to “melt the ice” even if the position of the Georgian people is clear: western course will not be denied.

Another very notable recent incident took place on January 18, when in his notorious interview Sergei Lavrov mentioned Georgia and Moldova in his comments about the lands governed by the west. It is not the first time Russian high-ranking politicians see the big anti-Russian conspiracy (2008 post-war statements). The main culprit, is, of course collective west. The comment praised the politics of Georgian current government, which, according to Lavrov, is not easily manipulated: “Georgia was also considered in the West as a new “anti-Russia” ... Tbilisi, despite pressure from outside, is guided by national interests. The country’s prime minister, in response to unprecedented pressure, says that Georgia will be guided solely by national interests.”¹⁴ It is interesting how Lavrov directly assumes that the national interest in Georgia is anti-western. In fact, it is very much opposite, moreover, Georgia’s European integration and its promotion is direct duty of the government and every state institution based on Georgian Constitution. Many dangerous silent points were made in this interview by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia. One of them was also concerning the issue of Karabakh, region of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Lavrov mentioned: “Karabakh was part of the Azerbaijan SSR.” This phrase indicates that Russian ministry of foreign affairs still considers Azerbaijan as SSR or the part of Soviet Union which has been dissolved for more than three decades now. This is not the first time we can hear restorative nostalgia of USSR in the Russian policy-makers speeches. As Boym mentions restorative nostalgia “stresses home and attempts at transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home”¹⁵ If it can be stressed that for Lavrov USSR was perceived as home, it might become clear why is it so important to restore the vision of USSR.

There is a dramatic shift in the position of Russian minister of foreign affairs lately concerning Georgian matters. Back in 2008 in his interview Lavrov expressed concern for safety of the region as “Georgia is for sure number one arms importer of the world. And now we see these arms being put in action to the detriment of all the civilians, many of whom are Russian citizens.” (Lavrov, 2008)¹⁶ As we see geopolitical interests taking turns, Russia dramatically changes position after 15 years from August war and after the Criminal Court investigation in 2015 which recognized that “between 51 and 113 ethnic Georgian civilians were killed during a “forcible displacement campaign” conducted by South Ossetia’s de facto authorities, with the possible participation of members of the Russian Armed Forces. Between 13,400 and 18,500 ethnic Georgians were forcibly displaced and more than 5,000 dwellings belonging to ethnic Georgians were reportedly destroyed as part of this campaign.”¹⁷ However, the high ranking representatives of Russian federation continue seek establishing link with Georgian government and trigger nation simultaneously.

The interview of Lavrov was followed by the new information about resumption of flights between Georgia and Russia. The background story of the decision of flight cancellation was connected to the protest movements that took place in Georgia after the appearance of Russian State Duma deputy Sergei Gavrilov in Georgian parliament where he took the seat of parliamentary speaker. It was recognized as “protocol error”, however, for a lot of Georgians this step was confirmation of occupant mindset.¹⁸ In response to the massive manifestations Russian federation decided to “punish” Georgians by cancellation of flights between Georgia and Russia. Exactly this decision became the reason for second big attempt to entice Georgian people and government in new, “warmer” era of Russo-Georgian diplomacy. More precisely, recently Grigory Karasin, head of the International Affairs Committee of the Council of the Russian Federation, officially confirmed that restoration of direct flights between Russia and Georgia is being considered. In his interview Karasin mentions that it should be bilaterally agreed initiative: “Of course, we will discuss it, exchange ideas with each other. But there is a saying that it takes two to tango. If one hesitates, there is no need to use force. There is a possibility, but what the solution will be depends not only on us.”¹⁹ This move is dictated not only by the wish of Russians to strengthen position in Georgia, but also by practicality, to make transportation of their citizens easier.

The response of Georgian government was founded on the idea, that the initial decision on flight cancellation was not made by Georgian side. As the chairman of ruling party Georgian Dream announced “What took a unilateral decision at the time, in 2019, does not need a tango in 2023. It also takes a unilateral decision. Therefore, talking about dancing in a duo is out of the question. If a unilateral decision is made, it is up to them to decide what they will do unilaterally.”²⁰ (Irakli Kobakhidze) Position of Georgian government stayed unchanged so far, so the plan of flight restoration is still just a plan.

The politics of Russian federation cause much controversy as it is unclear: is this “warm” diplomacy the attempt to actually bring diplomatic relations to life or is it an attempt to trigger conflict between the society and the government?

The most recent initiative which caused big reaction from the side of Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs was the unrest inside the society caused by so-called “Foreign Agents Law”. Under the bill, non-government groups and media would be targeted if they take over 20% of funding from abroad. They needed to register themselves as “Foreign Agents”. According to the governmental representatives “the bill was modelled on the U.S. 1938 “Foreign Agents Registration Act”, which primarily covers lobbyists and organisations directly working for or under the control of foreign governments.”²¹ For Georgian society, given copy of given bill would threaten civil society of Georgia and it could directly be aimed at political opponents. This is the reason why majority of Georgians stroke the street and manifested against the bill. Eventually bill was withdrawn completely by the government. However, the fears and the doubts stayed that the bill might have been connected to the Russian interest as it tried to impose control over the part of society: Armaz Akhvlediani, an independent opposition member of parliament and former secretary-general of Georgian Dream said it had “Russian interests” that worked against “democracy and rule of law”.²²

At the same time, Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov made an announcement denying any connection of Kremlin to the proposed bill but warned Russian citizens to be very careful as the riots in streets might have been dangerous for Russian citizens.²³ One might think the comments of Russian federation would stop on simple announcement, however, even Minister of foreign affairs Sergei Lavrov found time amidst war to comment on Georgian bill and it’s failure.

Russian Foreign Affairs minister Sergei Lavrov expressed opinion on Foreign Agents: “There is no doubt that the law on the registration of non-governmental organizations... was used as an excuse to start, generally speaking, an attempt to change the government by force”.²⁴ Obviously, Russian policymaker saw the attempt of coup in pro-European manifestations: “the protests in Tbilisi were far from peaceful, as we could see, cars were turned over, and demonstrators used tear gas, and smoke bombs”.²⁵ Moreover, he believes that these manifestations were orchestrated from the west “We see where the president of Georgia is addressing her people from... (referring to Georgian president’s address from New York)... Developments in Georgia are certainly being orchestrated from overseas. The driver is the same; it is the desire to create an irritant along Russia’s borders”.²⁶

It is clear that Russia considers Georgia as one of the “irritants” due to its western course. This western conspiracy idea can also be attributed to restorative nostalgia of Russian federation “Restorative nostalgia is at the core of recent national and religious revivals. It knows two main plots—the return to origins and the conspiracy. Restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland to conquer and specialize time”.²⁷ This might explain such concern of western values in South Caucasus exhibited by Lavrov. On one hand his quotes can be considered as an expression of restorative nostalgia, on the other hand these quotes also leave a room for doubt of the implied threat. It can be easily guessed what the “irritant” might expect from Russia, considering occupied territories and considering the war of 2008.

4. Conclusion

It is hard to predict future dynamics of the Caucasus region where Georgia belongs. However, the recent attempt of relationship improvement by Russian federation clearly shows their ambition to return influence and wish to strengthen their positions in the region. Georgian government was at first invited in 3+3 format, afterwards the generous offer of flight restoration was made to Georgian government. Finally, Georgian people got criticism and country was baptized as “irritant”. Logically it puts earlier attempts of warm diplomacy under the question. If the country is seen as irritant or potentially “western-orchestrated” why is it so desired to have it included in the process of regional negotiations. Equally suspicious is the fact that amidst all the war Russian minister of foreign affairs closely follows the story of manifestations in Georgia. At this moment the future open war with Georgia does not look possible based on all the current events. However, one can see clear signs of the trigger attempts. Russian initiatives concerning Georgia makes nation more triggered against the government which tries to pursue neutral politics. At the same time, the gap between the citizens of Georgia and the ruling party increase. Russian minister mentioned coup in his speech which might be desired by Russian side. In case of civil unrest, Russian forces can become “peacekeepers” in the region which is already attacked by western forces. Russian foreign affairs minister believe that west is trying to neglect Russia: “We see very well what goals the West is pursuing in the South Caucasus, in fact, it does not even hide them, it declares them: to tear Russia away (from the region).”²⁸ We are still yet to see where can these insecurities lead and what other tensions can be expect in south Caucasus which Russian forces do not want to cease from the area of control.

To sum up, all the above-given speeches and current processes unfolding in Georgia we can see that the south Caucasus, more particularly Georgia is the battlefield for implied fight. This silent conflict is taking place between the instilled Russian values and desired European ones. Georgia is viewed as the strong forefront for European values in the eyes of Russian politicians. This is why having pressure on Georgian political system is so vital for them: Russia views Georgia as land of increased western influence so, for them winning their

position back in Georgia is equal to crusade. In this variable, military opposition against Georgia is probable, however, not as the direct aggression, but the promotion of anti-western sentiments inside the society. As well as promotion of extreme polarization inside the community to cause civil unrest where Russia can enter as the regional peacekeeping force (as we have already seen on the example of Nagorno-Karabakh).

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