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FOREIGN POLICY CHANGES IN GEORGIA

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Georgia–Turkey Relations in a Georgian Dream Era

By Michael Cecire, Philadelphia

Abstract

As one of the quieter subplots of South Caucasus geopolitics, ties between Georgia and Turkey have traced a sharply upwards trajectory since the turn of the century. To Georgia, Turkey has been a strong trade partner, a source of defense materiel and training, and an advocate for its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. While promising under the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) in Turkey and Eduard Shevardnadze's rule in Georgia, the relationship has especially grown since the 2004 Rose Revolution that brought Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM) to power. However, the surprise victory by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream Coalition in the October 2012 parliamentary elections has cast the future of bilateral relations into question. Yet despite these questions, national interests are likely to keep Georgia–Turkey relations on a positive direction.

Georgia–Turkey Relations Under the UNM

Historically, various political expressions of the Turkish and Georgian civilizations have been in close contact and interacted with one another for thousands of years. As late as the latter part of the 19th century, the Turkish Ottoman Empire controlled much of what is now today Western Georgia before it was delivered to Tsarist Russia in the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878. Though the handover finally reunified Georgia, it also began a period of Russian domination—with only the briefest of interruptions—until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite long historical ties, the Cold War amplified the separation between NATO-member Turkey and the Soviet republic Georgia. It was not until the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR that relations between Turkey and Georgia began to revive.

However, Turkey's interest in the region was mostly dominated by Ankara's relationship with their Muslim Turkic cousins in Azerbaijan, which was locked in conflict with Armenia over the separatist region of Nagorno Karabakh. It was not until the late 1990s that Turkey and Georgia, itself racked by separatist conflicts, began to assume more holistic and forward-looking relations. Under Shevardnadze, who tilted Georgia in a cautious but unmistakable Westward direction, Turkey's political role grew as it supported Georgian Euro-Atlantic aspirations and provided NATO-standard training and equipment to Georgia's ramshackle force. By 2001, Turkey had already become Georgia's number one trade partner at almost \$180 million in volume, slightly edging out Russia well before Moscow imposed *de facto* sanctions on Georgia in 2006.

This growth in ties further accelerated after the 2004 Rose Revolution, which brought Saakashvili, a former Shevardnadze-era justice minister, to power in a peaceful and impressive demonstration of people power. Under Saakashvili and his UNM, Georgia's Western orientation became more earnest and substantive. With Euro-

Atlantic integration elevated to the country's principal foreign policy goal, Tbilisi's approach regionally was shaped accordingly. The UNM government's campaign of state-building also sought to stamp out the endemic corruption that typified the previous regime and stabilize the country, which at the time of the Rose Revolution was badly fractured, beset by criminality, and potentially on-course for state failure. Utilizing a host of techniques, some legal and others clearly not, the UNM was able to strengthen the state dramatically, restore constitutional rule in autonomous Adjara, and promote economic development and restore some measure of prosperity. During this period, economic ties with Turkey expanded rapidly, and the two countries signed a free trade agreement in late 2007, paving the way for a relative explosion in trade volume between the two states. By 2011, Turkey-bound exports from Georgia had more than tripled over 2000 numbers. And imports, bolstered by the 2007 free trade agreement, grew over 11-fold.

As trade increased, so did foreign direct investment. Starting from \$17 million in Turkish FDI in 2003, the period between 2004 and 2011 averaged almost \$90 million in Turkish FDI in Georgia, with much of it clustered in Georgia's capital Tbilisi and the Adjara port city of Batumi. Adjara, which has enjoyed a measure of autonomy guaranteed by the 1921 Treaty of Kars, is home to the majority of Georgia's Sunni Muslim population and can claim a high degree of cultural and economic links with neighboring Turkey. Batumi's rapid economic development under the UNM has made it a favored destination for thousands of Turkish tourists, who consistently rank among the top group of visitors to Georgia. Between 2005 and 2012, 505,588 Turkish citizens visited Georgia, and Turkey was the number one source of visitors to Georgia in 2011 and 2012. Such tourism was undoubtedly benefited when the two countries dropped visa requirements in 2009 and took the bold step of eliminating passport requirements in 2011.

The strides in the Turkey–Georgia trade relationship were matched by progress in joint infrastructure initiatives. Perhaps most famously, the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which ferries large quantities of Azerbaijani crude oil through Georgia to Turkey and European markets, is a major element of both Turkish–Georgian cooperation and the development of a Caspian–Caucasus–Black Sea energy corridor that has become a key element in Ankara’s energy and geopolitical strategy. The Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum natural gas pipeline, which runs largely parallel with the BTC pipeline, is another critical piece of energy infrastructure. In a similar vein, the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) project, agreed upon in 2012, is set to deliver yet more Azerbaijani hydrocarbons via Georgia to Turkey. Meanwhile, work is already underway on the construction of the Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway, launched in 2007, which will serve as a major artery for goods and passengers and further contribute to the economic integration of the three countries.

In parallel to the tremendous advances in economic relations, Turkey and Georgia have also grown closer politically. Seeking a regional counterweight to arch-foe Russia—with which Georgia fought a brief war in 2008, resulting in the complete loss of separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia—Turkey’s Western-alignment, growing geopolitical power, and friendliness have helped drive Tbilisi’s embrace of a larger Turkish role in the South Caucasus. In the wake of the 2008 war, Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) proposed the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, which sought to more fully insert Turkey into the region in a brokering role. Though the initiative failed to gain lasting momentum, it signaled a more robust Turkish role in the South Caucasus at large. More recently, in June 2012 the Trabzon Declaration was signed between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan—a tripartite agreement that affirmed the three states’ amicable relations, continued economic and political cooperation, and bolstered mutual support for the each party’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This agreement was particularly interesting as it essentially cemented Ankara’s longstanding, if occasionally muted, support for Georgia’s bid for NATO membership.

New Stressors to the Georgia–Turkey Relationship

On its face, relations between Georgia and Turkey look to be in every way a success story. Saakashvili, an ebullient and bullish advocate for Caucasus integration efforts, has often hailed bilateral relations with Turkey, once referring to ties as “perfect.” Such has been the UNM’s enthusiasm for its Turkey relationship that, in

contrast to prevailing opinions in Washington, Tbilisi was among the first to laud the quickly-aborted 2009 Turkey and Brazil-brokered nuclear fuel swap deal with Iran. However, grievances against Turkey’s growing influence in the country grew beneath the surface, creating latent stressors to the two countries’ friendship.

While the hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens entering Georgia yearly is a cause for celebration in Tbilisi statistics offices, the swelling crowds of visitors have stoked tensions in some parts of Georgia. Gambling, which is illegal in Turkey, has turned into a major industry in Georgia and especially in Batumi. While gaming has helped boost tourism numbers for Georgia, it has also been a cause for consternation among some Georgians, who allege that such tourism has brought with it other vices, including visible signs of prostitution. Likewise, widespread Turkish investments have also touched off objections by some Georgians. They complain that Turkish businesses bring in Turkish construction firms that hire relatively few locals for their Georgia-based operations—to which some Georgians accused the then-ruling UNM of turning a blind eye, despite the country’s high unemployment rate.

Complaints by Georgians about their Turkish guests reached a fever pitch during the campaign leading to the October 2012 parliamentary election. In full campaign mode, Shalva Khachapuridze, a failed Georgian Dream Coalition single-mandate candidate in Tetri Tskaro, snidely referred to Batumi as a “Turkish city” and claimed, in language reminiscent of the xenophobia-fueled 1990s, that “Georgia has to be for Georgians.” Similarly, Mamuka Dumbadze, now a vice-speaker of parliament in the new Georgian Dream government, has made his name in the past for his strongly nationalistic views and strident opposition to the building of a mosque in Batumi (“raze it to the ground with bulldozers”). Of potentially greater concern, however, is the powerful Georgian Orthodox Church’s opposition to the mosque’s construction, even though it was brokered under a deal that would see the rehabilitation of the Oshki monastery—a major Georgian cultural site in present-day Turkey built in the 10th century.

With a nationalistic vein lacing through certain elements of Georgian Dream’s leadership, some of the cultural biases could give way to economic jingoism. Despite having been Georgia’s largest trade partner for many years, the bilateral trade relationship is heavily imbalanced in Turkey’s favor. By some accounts, Tbilisi’s decision to establish a free trade regime in 2007 allowed for Turkish goods to overwhelm Georgian manufacturers still in their infancy. Such considerations could convince the new government to backtrack or water down the free trade regime with Turkey.

Not dissimilarly, the new government has hinted about reconsidering high profile international projects like the Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway, which is seen as a critical economic and strategic initiative in both Ankara and Baku. Meanwhile, however, Georgia has eagerly pursued economic normalization with Russia and has even entertained the idea of reopening the Georgia–Abkhazia railway, which would provide landlocked and largely-isolated Armenia with badly-needed egress to Russian markets.

National Interests and the Durability of Relations

In spite of these stressors to Georgia–Turkey relations, the future of bilateral relations for the two neighbors remains bright. Guided by enduring national interests, Tbilisi is most likely to preserve and preside over the continued growth of its partnership with Ankara.

Though xenophobic elements do seem to be embedded in some quarters of the ruling party’s expansive and diverse membership—a coalition whose common bond is primarily a shared opposition to the UNM—the policymaking stratum of the Georgian Dream leadership is not outwardly supportive of hyper-nationalism and is generally sensitive to international concerns about the new government’s direction. More practically speaking, the regional economic interdependence spearheaded during the UNM’s tenure in power make major readjustments neither easy nor particularly desirable.

For example, after questioning the Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway as well as rates for Azerbaijan-supplied natural gas, Ivanishvili came to reaffirm both after his trip to Azerbaijan. And although Georgian Dream is host to certain factions and leaders that would support a more protectionist trade policy, raising barriers to trade would almost certainly negatively impact the price of consumer goods, which would be very unpopular domestically—and could even run afoul of Georgia’s WTO obligations. While Georgia’s trade imbalance with Turkey may have raised the barrier to entry for Georgian manufacturers, it has also helped establish higher-quality baseline standards that will make harmonizing with E.U. standards—as part of ongoing Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement negotiations, which the current government hopes to conclude successfully this year—a less burdensome task.

Overall, actual policy towards Turkey is unlikely to see any major shift under the new government because

of national interests that keep it tethered Westward and, with it, to Turkey. In its recently-released 14-point foreign policy framework, which the ruling party has envisaged as the basis for a joint document with the now-opposition UNM, economic and political cooperation with neighbors Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia—in that order—are highlighted. While Georgia’s foreign policy has seemed to tone down the UNM’s emphatic rhetoric, it has nonetheless maintained the previous government’s Western orientation. Indeed, Euro-Atlantic integration remains a stated and eagerly pursued goal by Tbilisi.

What chiefly differentiates the Georgian Dream foreign policy from that of the UNM is more about priorities. While foreign policy, and the process of Westernization—in appearance if not always in substance—was the overriding narrative that characterized UNM governance, Georgian Dream has subordinated foreign policy goals to domestic issues. In effect, Tbilisi has sought to use foreign policy to support its domestic agenda, which emphasizes economic development and the jobs that come with them. Even its more controversial measures, such as Tbilisi’s efforts to broker economic normalization with Russia, can be best understood within the rubric of domestic economic development. Likewise, Ivanishvili’s initial skepticism over the Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway seemed to have been spurred by concerns over the railway’s impact on business through its Poti and Batumi ports rather than some repudiation of the grand geopolitical symbolism that the railway represented.

Ultimately, however, the powerful economic driver that Turkey represents—as well as its strong support for Georgian territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic aspirations—will keep bilateral relations close. Indeed, recent visits by Ivanishvili and Defense Minister Irakli Alasania to Turkey have served to reaffirm friendly ties and the two countries’ continued economic and foreign policy cooperation. Though Turkey may have lost the passionate advocacy of UNM rule, Georgia’s new government should be expected to at least maintain the upwards trajectory staked out by the previous government. When it comes down to it, Georgia cannot afford to allow its regional relationships to deteriorate, much less with one of its largest and arguably closest neighbors.

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Georgia's European Choice: Has an Old Georgian Dream Changed?

By Kakha Gogolashvili, Tbilisi

Abstract

All Georgian parties support a pro-western foreign policy. By appearing to support closer ties with Russia and Armenia, while questioning projects being developed with Azerbaijan, the new government seemed to place in doubt the future of the pro-West orientation. Critics of the government have pointed out that conducting bilateral relations with Russia could weaken Georgia's position. Ultimately, only the establishment of secure democratic institutions in Georgia will assure the success of its efforts to join the West.

Seeking a Place in the West

Georgia's pro-western foreign policy orientation has never been disputed since its independence. The country survived several wars and constant pressure from Russia, its powerful northern neighbor, but never agreed to change its course toward the West.

Public opinion and support for the western policy vector was always so strong that no party opposing this course has ever managed to enter parliament (either as part of the ruling party or opposition). Both Georgian Dream and the United National Movement (UNM), respectively the current ruling majority coalition and the former ruling party (now in opposition), have clearly stated their full support for a pro-western policy in their electoral programs.

Indeed, the new majority coalition has yet to be able to dispel the numerous allegations that it intends to change the country's foreign policy orientation. In fact, the parliamentary majority is a coalition of forces with different political tastes and, despite the presence of a strong pro-European wing inside it, appears largely amorphous in regard to its foreign policy preferences.

Nevertheless, Georgia continues to successfully negotiate its Association Agreement with the EU. It is also important to mention that this government, free from the libertarian ideas of its predecessor, is much more efficient in introducing the legal and regulatory reforms necessary to move forward in deep and comprehensive free trade agreement (DCFTA) negotiations with the EU. Reform of the defense and security sector goes in line with NATO recommendations and there are no direct signs of Georgia deviating from the Euro-Atlantic agenda. The new government is also more attentive to EU critics in the sphere of human rights and makes considerable efforts in this direction as well.

Post-Electoral Instabilities. Democratic Transfer of Power or Surrender?

The post-election situation has been tense and the level of division and confrontation among leading parties remains unusually strong. There is an on-going debate

over whether the 2012 parliamentary election resulted in a peaceful transfer of power or a revolution.

Many people in Georgia believed that when the National Movement suffered defeat in the parliamentary elections, it should have given up the power that it retains in the other branches of government. The president himself, being aware of such sentiments, voluntarily transferred to the winning coalition his constitutional right to name the government and present it to the parliament for confirmation.

The parliamentary majority coalition formed the government, but the president's legal power to dissolve the parliament and the government make the parliamentary majority nervous. After failing to attract enough parliamentarians from the opposition camp to change the constitution, the Georgian Dream initiated a public campaign to convince the president and the UNM to agree on constitutional amendments depriving the head of state of the ability to dissolve parliament. Georgia's lack of political culture, patience and experience fueled a climate of intolerance, especially in the regions, where a considerable number of locally-elected councils, still controlled by the "Nationals" faced intense pressure from "Dream" supporters. In a number of local districts, the elected chairmen of the "Sakrebulo" (local councils) have been forced to resign. Unfortunately, the government failed to prevent such illegal actions from taking place outside the capital. Opposition supporters even suspect that the government is the instigator of such developments. Immediately after the election, soon-to-be Prime Minister Ivanishvili publicly called on President Saakashvili to retire from his position. This was considered in Washington and Brussels as an antidemocratic move and provoked an immediate reaction from State Secretary Hillary Clinton and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

While the current ruling party, unprepared for the unexpected election victory that put it in power, felt uncomfortable due to the incompetence of a part of its newly appointed ministers and the lack of political experience by the prime minister himself, the opposition, the party that had ruled the country for the last nine years,

took advantage of the situation to attack the government for any mistake or wrong statement that it made.

The political temperature rose immediately following the detention of some former high-level officials, including one minister, by the new authorities. The arrests were carried out with no definite evidence or charges. Afraid of a political *revanche*, U.S. and European officials, including the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, urged the new Georgian authorities to avoid the temptation to “eliminate” the political opposition party. They called on the government to try to develop a spirit of “cohabitation.” The European Political Party (EPP) joined these critics from the start and just recently its leader publicly suggested that concluding an Association Agreement with “such a country” should be questioned. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly, in its resolution of November 12, 2012, expressed concern about the “reported pressure on local self-government institutions and particularly the Georgian Public Broadcaster” and called upon the new government of Georgia to refrain from “politically motivated arrests.” In addition the NATO Secretary General and President of the European Commission have also advised the newly appointed prime minister “to avoid selective justice against political opponents.” The NATO–Georgia Joint Commission meeting to be held in November 2012 was postponed because of the arrest (again based on allegations not backed by evidence) of the Chief of the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces.

While the ruling party leaders were trying to explain (without tangible success) their behavior as reflecting a legitimate intention to bring to justice members of the former government who committed crimes and legal violations, arrests and subsequent reactions have certainly posed a threat to Georgia’s international image. On the other hand, the image of the “West” as a place of normative power continuously suffers in the eyes of those Georgians supporting the Georgian Dream and its leader. The term “cohabitation” has become a popular “foreign” word in Georgia, but regrettably with negative connotations. The electorate of the Georgian Dream believes that the “western friends of Saakashvili” use the term in an attempt to save him and his party from a full-fledged withdrawal from the political arena. Over the long run, such attitudes can diminish the public support for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, which during the last decade held steady at the level of 80%.

The new government attributes its failure to consolidate international opinion in its favor to the activities of “Saakashvili lobbyists in Washington and Brussels.” While Mr. Ivanishvili and other leaders of the Georgian Dream continue to denounce Mr. Mikheil Saakashvili

and the National Movement, demonizing them in excess of their actual mistakes and law breaking, mistrust in European sincerity and sense of justice is growing among the population. Since trust in the Georgian Dream and especially in its leader Mr. Bidzina Ivanishvili is high, the conflict of their positions with the European and American views on the developments in Georgia may damage the West’s position in the country. This is not in the apparent interest of either of the two political sides, but UNM leaders believe (or make us to believe) that by denouncing the Georgian Dream’s allegedly anti-European stance, they are trying to save the country’s future. Public opinion becomes even more confused, when in hot debates about foreign policy issues both parties accuse the other of a pseudo-Europeanism.

South Caucasian Politics and the European Aspiration

The Prime Minister’s visits to Armenia and Azerbaijan in January 2013 provoked another round of debate because of signs that he was changing Georgia’s foreign policy priorities. Just before the visit to Baku, Ivanishvili publicly questioned the importance for Georgia of the Kars–Akhalkalaki Railway, a new link being built that will connect Azerbaijan with Turkey via Georgia. Not only the opposition, but the rest of the wider public saw this comment as a threat to the Georgia–Azerbaijan strategic partnership.

This partnership produces a variety of regional projects that make Georgia an important hub in East–West energy and transport connections. On one hand, these projects irritate Russia by weakening its exclusive position in supplying Europe with hydrocarbons. On the other, they raise Georgia’s importance and attractiveness for Europe. Therefore the partnership with Azerbaijan is considered in Georgia as one of the pillars of Georgia’s European strategy. It is obvious that this partnership is vital for both countries, if they want to remain independent players. Otherwise, Georgia or Azerbaijan alone would lose their natural geopolitical advantage and become much more vulnerable to Russia’s consistent attempts to exercise influence over them.

During his official visit to Armenia, Mr. Ivanishvili made two other controversial statements. One was about the intention to unconditionally reopen the Russia–Georgia railway connection through the break-away region of Abkhazia (now occupied by Russian forces). Another statement praised Armenia’s foreign policy for its flexibility towards Russia and the West and suggested that “Georgia should take example from her.” Both statements were interpreted as demonstrations of the willingness to increase political ties with the Russia–Armenia alliance, which, by its nature excludes the

possibility of preserving Georgia's Western orientation. Those who support Georgia's pro-Atlantic ties were particularly concerned that Armenia has no declared NATO membership aspirations and has not decided yet to go with Russia's Customs Union, or to sign a DCFTA with the EU. The opponents of reopening the Russia–Georgia railway connection (linking Russia with Armenia through Georgia) based their arguments on the point that doing so would play against the interests of Azerbaijan and that Russia would use the connection to establish its strategic advantage in the South Caucasus, consequently increasing its influence in the region.

All three statements were deemed by the opposition as anti-western. Many independent experts in Georgia joined these concerns too. Finally long explanations and justifications by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs defused the scandal, but the sudden retirement of the Deputy Foreign Minister known for his competence and dedication to NATO-related work raised doubts again. In a TV interview he explained that he resigned due to a disagreement with the new foreign policy course of the Government...

Russia: Restoring Relations?

Bilateral consultations with Russia constitute another topic of debate. The revival of relations with a country that through military aggression took two regions of Georgia just four years ago and continuously (as recognized internationally) occupies them is a delicate issue. The post-modern world excludes the reasonableness of full mutual isolation between hostile countries with territorial disputes or other controversies. Georgia achieved consolidation of international support around the *non-recognition* of the independence of the break-away regions. At the same time, for her own economic and political stability, Georgia needs to reach a certain level of normalization with Russia, including reopening cross-border trade, liberalizing the movement of people and reestablishing people-to-people contacts.

Georgian and Russian foreign policy visions contradict each other and leave no chance for developing partnership. Russian leaders frequently argue that Georgia should abandon its aspirations for NATO membership, stop calling the Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia “occupiers,” and start considering a return to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). These are, according to them, the main conditions for reestablishing trust between the countries.

Public opinion in Georgia supports normalization with Russia. People expect as a main benefit the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity, but the development of economic opportunities from trading with Russia (after six years of an embargo on Georgian goods)

sounds attractive too. Approximately one million Georgian citizens live in Russia, putting additional pressure on the Government to establish better relations. On the other hand, most Georgians are not inclined to accept Russia's conditions. Finally, a tangible outcome from the consultations conducted by the prime minister's special Representative Ambassador Zurab Abashidze may be seen in the improved conditions for trade and movement of persons.

Why has Russia agreed to open such bilateral consultations? The opposition in Georgia, supported by the opinion of many experts, warns the Government that developing bilateral consultations may be employed by Russia to downgrade the importance of the internationally-driven “Geneva format”, drive a wedge between Georgia and the EU, US and international organizations regarding the topic, and leave Georgia alone *tête-à-tête* with Russia. Weakening the international involvement would decrease chances for the country to resist Russia's political pressure. Another illicit objective perused by Russia is the weakening of Georgia's protest impulse and her international action against the continuous occupation of the country's territories. These tasks, if achieved, would significantly reduce the focus on Georgia's problems in the EU–Russia and US–Russia political dialogue agendas. It would also cut the pressure on Russia within international organizations (OSCE, CoE, among others). This development may finally have implications for Georgia's foreign policy orientation and this therefore is a matter of concern to many in the country.

Constitutional Debates and Guarantees of the Irreversibility of the Euro-Atlantic Orientation

In February 2013, when the government of Georgia reached 100 days in power, several Georgian NGOs issued a declaration calling on the country's political leaders to use all possible means (including constitutional action) to ensure solid legal guarantees for the irreversibility of a pro-Western foreign policy. The petition included an appeal for the authorities to adopt a legally-binding document forbidding consideration of the country's accession to any union or blocs in the post-soviet space led by Russia.

The debate around the necessity of such a legal act to be adopted started earlier, in January 2013, initiated by the parliamentary opposition (UNM). They appealed to the Parliament to include such provisions in the Constitution. The ruling majority was seemingly confused with such an unexpected challenge and was not able to formulate a clear position. The majority and government representatives' arguments against such a legal action were based on following considerations:

- The new Georgian government has already made a number of declarations asserting its adherence to

European and Euro-Atlantic values and its willingness to move the country towards integration in the respective structures.

- The Constitution of Georgia already contains provisions placing respect for democracy at the top of the state-building agenda, consequently (according to their logic) the western choice is already present there.
- A constitutional provision determining a country's foreign policy priorities and ability to accede to a political bloc has no precedent in the world and sounds "ridiculous" as a political demand.

There are no direct precedents of such a constitutional amendment, excepting the Lithuanian constitutional act of 1992 prohibiting the authorities from applying for membership in any post-soviet blocs or unions. The coalition Georgian Dream failed to develop more solid arguments. It was not clear from their comments why they were reluctant to provide such guarantees (for example, because of their fear of damaging the delicate conflict-transformation process they had initiated with Russia). They proposed instead an inter-faction agreement with 14 points, including at least three provisions affirming Georgia's move towards European and Euro-Atlantic structures. This draft became public and raised even more doubts in society because of some obscure provisions regarding Georgia's political role in the region (paragraph 7 of the draft) and proposed behavioral standard towards Russia–West contradictions (paragraph 9). Both provisions contained hints of a *neutralist policy*, which obviously is incompatible with the Euro-Atlantic aspiration.

The debate on these constitutional changes coincided with the demand from the ruling majority to remove the constitutional provision giving the President the right to dissolve the Government. Finally, after long debates both claims became the focus of a combined negotiating process. The opposition agreed to exchange some of the Presidential powers for guarantees on their reversibility of the country's western orientation. If an agreement is reached, it will probably end the period of instability

and the country will gain three guaranteed advantages: stability of the Government and Parliament, the prospect for the opposition to assert itself as a constructive political force, and the irreversibility of the European and Euro-Atlantic path of the country.

Conclusion

The first ever democratic transfer of power in Georgia improved the image of the country and created better conditions for its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. But the post-election process revealed remaining fundamental problems related to the institutional development of the country and its political culture.

Despite several achievements in reforms advised by the EU and NATO, the new government failed to create a strong image for the idea that the country's foreign policy orientation is irreversible. While debates about Georgia's European choice continue, the failing process of "cohabitation" and the inability of the country to consolidate its forces to address internal and external challenges raises major concern. Lack of capacity among state institutions and lack of qualified leadership creates another set of problems reflected in both domestic and foreign policy decision-making.

The ruling party, which engaged in bilateral consultations with Russia, is confronting more constraints than the opposition, whose open discourse resembles a win-win game. The government, most probably, fears that the opposition's proposed constitutional amendment (on the obligation of the government to continue with European and Euro-Atlantic integration, while prohibiting efforts to join the CIS, Eurasian Union, or other Russia-driven blocs) may affect Georgia's strategy in negotiations with Russia.

Ultimately, development of a constructive dialogue between major political forces, reaching understanding on issues of essential importance for the country, and improving justice and political culture are the only way to establish reliable guarantees for the country's European future.

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The 2012 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia and Changing Attitudes Toward Russia

By David Sichinava, Tbilisi

Abstract

Georgian attitudes toward Russia greatly improved after the October 1, 2012, parliamentary elections. The reason for the shift remains unclear but seems to be a result of some citizens' desire to conform to the opinions of the new ruling party and to benefit from the improving relations. The change in attitudes toward Russia do not reduce popular support for joining the EU and NATO.

Preconditions

Georgia's October 1, 2012, parliamentary elections did more than simply mark a break between a past characterized by violent regime change and a present in which the country's leaders are able to implement peaceful political change; they also indicated an interesting shift in public opinion. An important share of Georgians changed their minds and expressed different views toward the so-called Russian question—a hotly debated topic in society. As one of the most discussed issues in the country, attitudes toward Russia influenced and were influenced by the campaign. The members of the United National Movement often accused their rivals of being “Russian puppets,” “a project of the Kremlin” and betrayers of Georgia's national interests. On the other hand, the Georgian Dream Coalition suggested that its leaders would try to normalize the troubled relationship with Georgia's northern neighbor.

Public opinion during the pre-electoral period (and afterwards) suggested that the overwhelming majority of Georgians were not satisfied with the existing relationship between the two countries. Consecutive polls conducted by the National Democratic Institute showed that approximately 88 percent of the surveyed people expressed their unhappiness in February 2012 and June 2012. However, the polls right after the elections, which the Georgian Dream Coalition won, showed a stunning shift. In NDI's November 2012 polls, only 26% of the respondents described Russia as a real threat, while in previous surveys about a half of the respondents held that opinion (see Figure 1). Interestingly, the shift does not affect how the respondents perceived Georgia's integration into NATO and the EU.

Like the NDI polls, other surveys also reveal that there is an important shift in how people are thinking about Russia, the Russian language and Russians. This article will examine the longitudinal results of public opinion polls over the last four years, examine how the attitudes fluctuate across the different population groups inside Georgian society, and explain the reasons for this shift.

Data

This article examines the data of the Caucasus Barometer, an annual nationwide representative survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in the countries of the South Caucasus. It consists of four consecutive waves of the poll starting from 2009, including the last one conducted right after the 2012 parliamentary elections.

Caucasus Barometer data includes several variables assessing attitudes towards Russia, the Russian language and social interaction with Russians. The variables measure which language should be mandatory at schools, which are friendly and enemy countries, and how people justify marriage and economic activities with Russians. The analysis looks at the longitudinal trends and compares the attitudes of different population groups identified with their demographic, social and geographic characteristics—education, age and location of residence.

Changing Attitudes

The perception of friendly and enemy countries—the images of the United States and Russia respectively—has been steady over the last several years. There are a lot of factors which contributed to the formation of this pattern, starting from the 2008 war, occupation and, of course, powerful media coverage, which helped to crystallize people's negative image and opinion of Russia. For example, in 2011 almost half of the respondents named Russia as the main enemy of Georgia and about 44% of the respondents saw the United States as the friendliest country. However, the results of the polling conducted in the late fall of 2012 showed a changing pattern: the share of the United States as a friendly country decreased by nine percent, while the share of Russia increased. Moreover, the percentage of people declaring Russia as the main enemy for Georgia decreased by 15% during this period (see Figure 2).

Another important shift in public opinion is observed when looking at how people perceive the necessity of teaching foreign languages at schools. Until 2012, the larger share of the respondents, about 70%, appeared

to be in favor of teaching English, while only about 15% named Russian as the main mandatory foreign language. However, in 2012 there was a sudden drop of support for English, while the share of supporters of Russian almost doubled.

Approval for doing business with Russians also increased during this period from 76% to 84%. The same trend can be observed when speaking about whether people justify Georgian women marrying Russians—the share of people who would not approve such marriages decreased in line with the rise of the share of people favoring this kind of relationship.

The data show that public opinion changed after the 2012 elections in Georgia, especially different aspects of attitudes towards Russia. Overall, the respondents show improved feelings toward Russia, as they are less likely to name Russia as an enemy. They also changed their attitudes towards mandatory language instruction at schools and are willing to tolerate business and marital relationships with Russians. Below we will examine and compare the attitudes of people who belong to the different socio-demographic and geographic groups.

Geography

The geographic factor becomes clear when we group the data by settlement type. The results show a strong difference between the attitudes of residents of Tbilisi, other urban areas, and the rural population. In general, the results of consecutive polls in 2011 and 2012 show that people living in the urban settlements outside the capital and in villages are less likely to name Russia as an enemy than those in Tbilisi. Moreover, compared with previous years, in 2012 the opinion of village residents changed dramatically towards mandatory language instruction at schools—about 40% of the respondents in this particular group stated that Russian should be compulsory while in the urban areas, including Tbilisi, the overwhelming majority of the population named English. What is most striking is that in previous years, rural residents were much less interested in Russian.

Attitudes change when the respondents refer to social and economic relations. The residents of Tbilisi and other urban areas are more willing to tolerate women's marriage to Russians than village inhabitants. When looking at the longitudinal trends, we can observe a rise in the positive attitudes of Tbilisi residents, whilst the opinion of other urban residents and the village population fluctuates over the years. As for the business relations with Russians, the approval rate was quite high during the last four years (starting from 67% and reaching its peak in 2012), however, the respondents in villages express the lowest willingness to approve business relations with Russians, while almost 90% of urban

residents, including those in Tbilisi, support such ties (see Figure 3).

The analysis shows that there is a clear distinction between the attitudes of respondents residing in different parts of the country. People in the rural areas tend to have more positive attitudes towards Russia and the introduction of Russian language in schools than the residents of urban settlements, however the latter express more eagerness to tolerate doing business and marriage with Russians.

Age and Education

Demographic and social factors are important when speaking about the difference of opinion among the respondents. People in the youngest group (from 18 to 35) are more likely to name Russia as an enemy than older respondents. Despite the important drop between 2011 and 2012 from 55% to 41%, younger Georgians remain the most suspicious of Russia. The representatives of the middle-aged respondents (from 46 to 55) are in the middle in their opinion as well, especially regarding the question of compulsory language instruction at schools. However, when asked about friendly and enemy countries, they share the opinion of their older counterparts. Surprisingly enough, young people seem to be only slightly tolerant toward the idea of Georgian women marrying Russians. There is a small difference as well between the opinions about the approval of doing business with Russians. Here younger people are also more eager to accept this decision in contrast to older respondents, but similarly to the marriage question, the groups share more or less the same pattern of behavior.

When looking at the results by grouping respondents according to their level of education, we can distinguish some interesting patterns. In 2012 respondents with higher education were more willing to name Russia as an enemy than people with secondary or secondary technical education, while 13% of the latter group named Russia as a friend. Of course, in 2011 a larger share of people thought of Russia as an enemy and interestingly enough the results were quite similar for the respondents of different levels of education. Longitudinal trend analysis shows that Russian as the mandatory language at schools is more preferable for people with secondary or lower education, especially in 2012: 37% of the respondents with less education favored Russian over other languages while only 24% of respondents with higher education did so. Similarly to the younger people, respondents with higher education are more likely to tolerate both marriage and business relations with Russians.

Socio-demographic variables seem to differentiate people's opinion—young people and more educated

respondents are tolerant towards business and marital relations with Russians, but they express less favor for Russia and the Russian language. We can hypothesize that less educated and older citizens maintain more traditional values, and thus they are less eager to approve marriage and business relations with Russians (and the representatives of other ethnicities as well).

Why Has This Shift Occurred?

The reason for this rapid change remains unclear. There are numerous factors which could serve as explanations for the shift, but they need further study before we can confirm them.

As noted above, the “Russian question” is a very sensitive topic in Georgian society and the source of fierce political debate as well. When the United National Movement formed the government, the idea of supporting Russia was marginalized as a taboo, with extensive negative coverage of Russia in the media, especially television. One possible explanation for the shift in opinion could be that this media pressure helped to elaborate some kind of “proper behavior,” which also was reflected in the public opinion polls. On the other hand, polls showed that people felt quite uncomfortable with the existing situation, especially that regarding Russia, so despite the existing consensus against Russia (which itself appeared to be quite fragile), there was a strong support for normalizing relations.

The victory of the Georgian Dream Coalition could be identified as one of the major reasons for the shift in public opinion. Taking into account the fact that it was this political group which had called for the normalization of Georgia–Russia relations and listed improved

relations as one of the main priorities in its election platform, the role of “proper behavior” could be important here as well, as the previous image of Georgian Dream Coalition created by the media emphasized their “pro-Russian sentiments.” In other words people who use the media to define what is the “right answer” switched to the opposite side when the new group took power.

On the other hand, the possibility of improving relations with Russia also could affect the formation of this opinion. However, there are some difficulties when applying this explanation. The rural areas were one of the main bases of support for the United National Movement, but respondents from these areas expressed the highest eagerness towards Russian language and there was a huge drop in their opinion that Russia was an enemy; in effect, they did not support the position of their favored political party. If we take normalization of relations as the possibility of restoring Georgia’s traditional market for its agricultural goods, we see that rural people are less eager to do business with Russians. However, as noted above, the share of the population who approve business activities remains quite high. Thus, possibly village residents see fewer opportunities for normalizing relations than people living in urban areas.

Overall, we still do not have enough data to determine whether the 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia caused a major shift in public opinion toward Russia. The most likely explanations include “proper behavior” by the respondents who feel like they should do what the new authorities expect and a desire to benefit from the improved relations. Further study will help to confirm these findings.

About the Author

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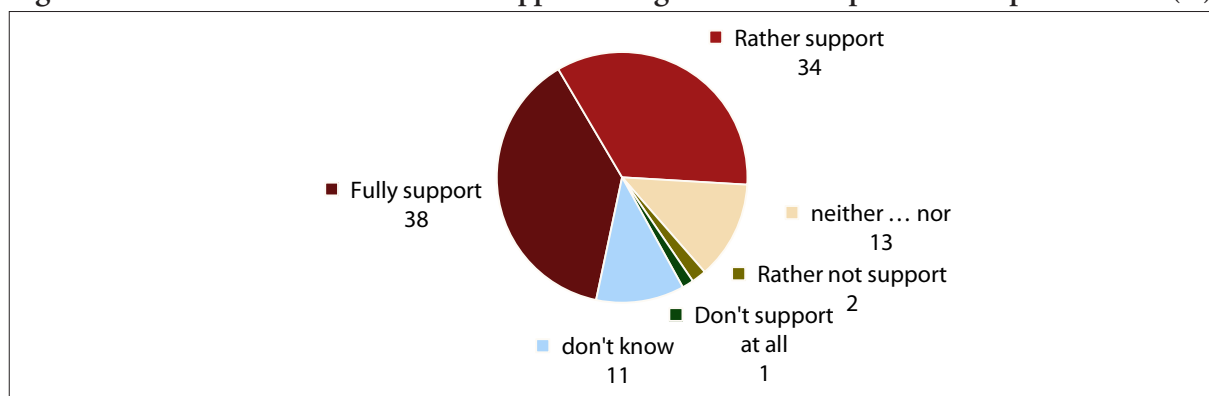
Data Sources:

- Data from NDI polls were retrieved from the public presentations hosted on <http://www.ndi.org>. The research was carried out for NDI by CRRC and funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)
- The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2009–2012 “Caucasus Barometer”.

OPINION POLL

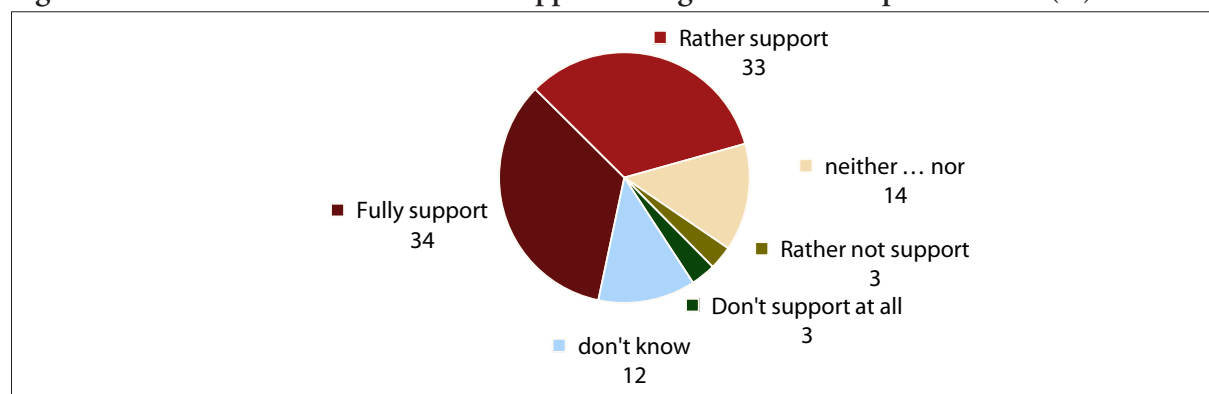
The Foreign Policy Preferences of the Georgian Population

Figure 1: To What Extent Would You Support Georgia's Membership in the European Union? (%)



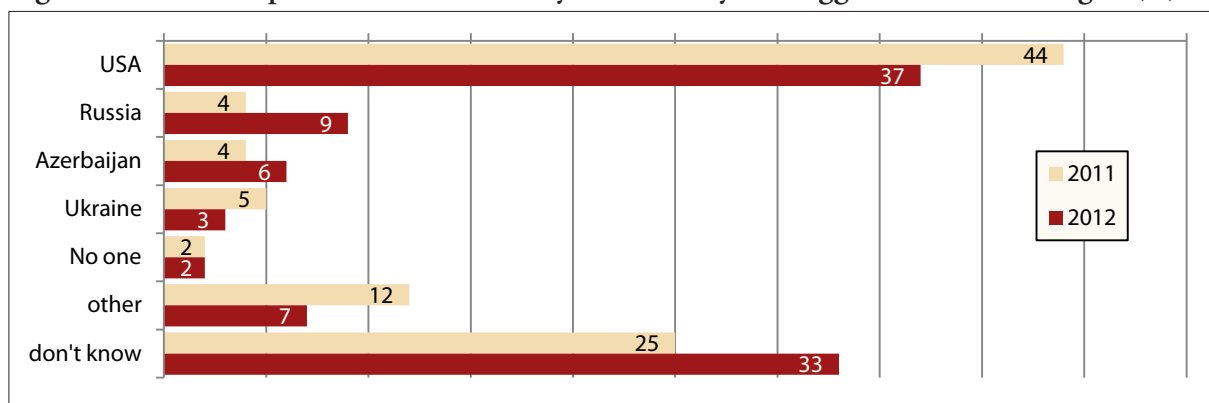
Source: Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2012 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)

Figure 2: To What Extent Would You Support Georgia's Membership in NATO? (%)



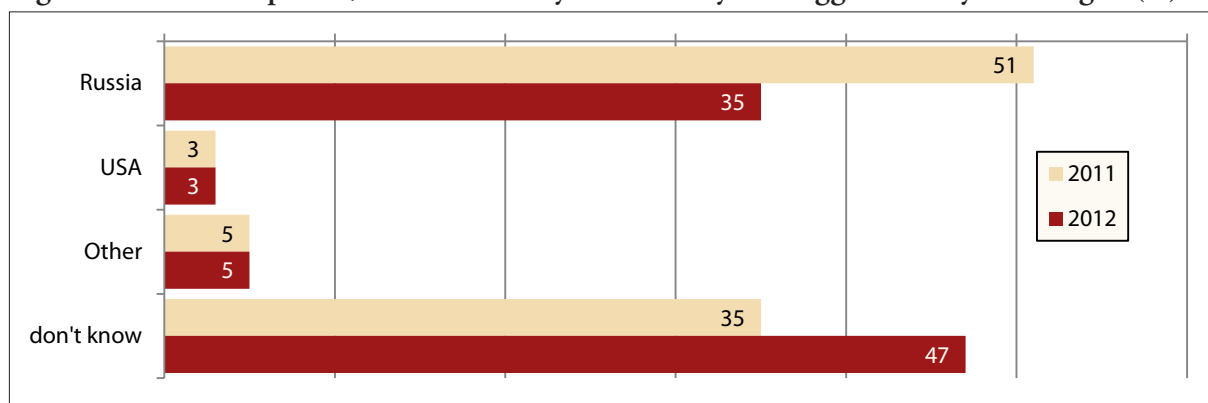
Source: Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2012 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)

Figure 3: In Your Opinion, Which Country Is Currently the Biggest Friend of Georgia? (%)



Source: Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2012 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)

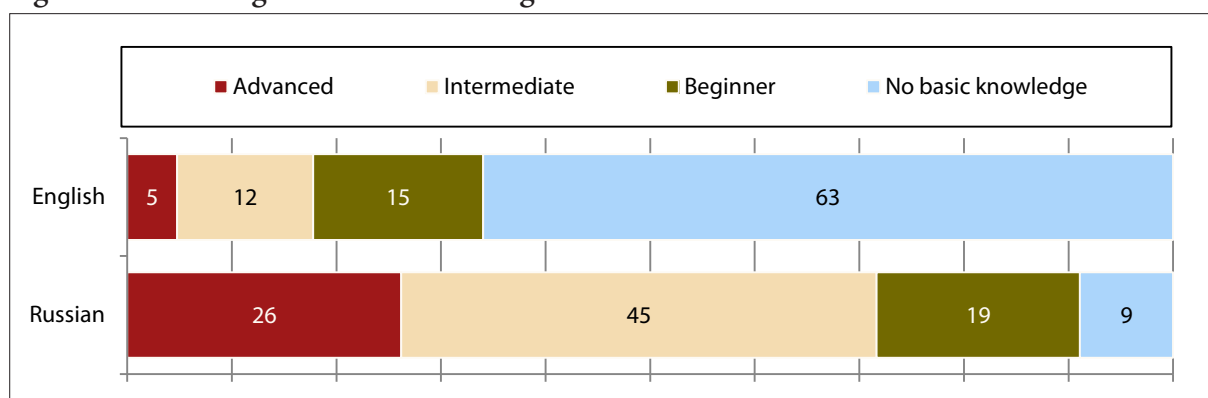
Figure 4: In Your Opinion, Which Country Is Currently the Biggest Enemy of Georgia? (%)



Source: Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2012 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)

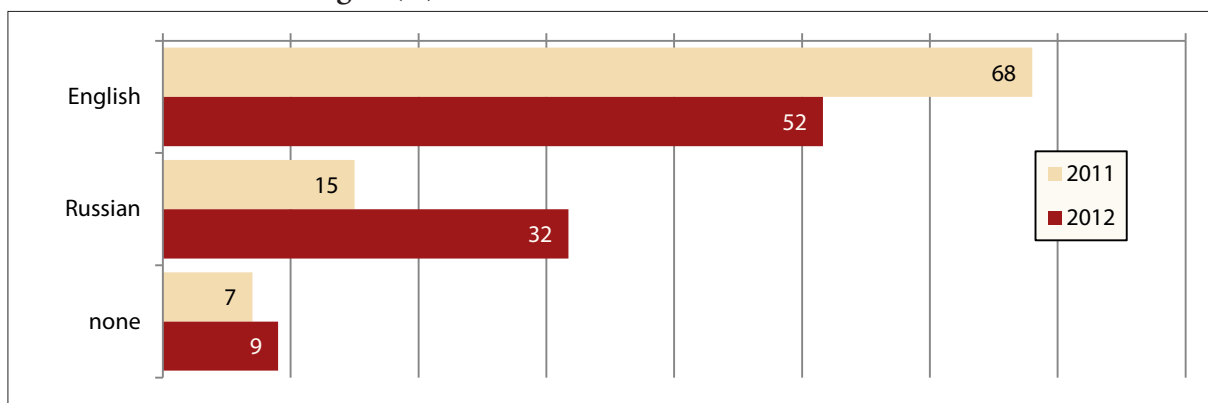
The Role of the Russian Language in Georgia

Figure 1: Knowledge of Russian and English



Source: Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2012 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)

Figure 2: Which Foreign Language, If Any, Do You Think Should Be Mandatory In Secondary Schools of Georgia? (%)



Source: Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2012 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)

CHRONICLE

From 19 February to 3 March 2013

19 February 2013	Armenian opposition leader Raffi Hovannisian rejects as fraudulent the official results of the presidential elections, which gave the victory to Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian, in front of thousands of supporters gathered in Yerevan
21 February 2013	Armenian opposition candidate Raffi Hovannisian meets with incumbent President Serzh Sarkisian and calls on protesters after the meeting to suspend their rally and gather again for an officially approved rally on 22 February on Liberty Square in Yerevan
22 February 2013	Thousands of protesters gather in Yerevan to demonstrate against the re-election of incumbent President Serzh Sarkisian
22 February 2013	Georgian Defence Minister Irakli Alasania says that Georgia will provide training to Afghan troops in Georgia and on the ground in Afghanistan after the NATO-led operation ends in 2014 during a meeting at the NATO headquarters in Brussels
22 February 2013	The Georgian Finance Ministry's Investigations Service says that criminal charges will be filed against Tbilisi mayor Gigi Ugulava
22 February 2013	The Azerbaijani Parliament approves an amendment to the law on religions limiting the sale of religious material to the ones officially allowed for sale in the country in specially designated stores
24 February 2013	Prosecutors request the court to suspend the mayor of Tbilisi Gigi Ugulava from office as he is facing charges of money laundering and mispending of public funds
25 February 2013	Armenia's Central Election Commission officially certifies Serzh Sarkisian as the winner of the 18 February presidential election
25 February 2013	The EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström hands over to the Georgian leadership an action plan for visa liberalisation during a meeting with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in Tbilisi
25 February 2013	Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov remarks that the new Georgian government "acts pragmatically" but that the deepening of economic ties between the two countries will not be "at the expense of our brothers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia"
27 February 2013	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili starts a two-day visit to Azerbaijan and meets with Azeri President Ilham Aliyev
27 February 2013	The prison population in Georgia more than halves in the period of January-February 2013 after a law on amnesty goes into effect
27 February 2013	The head of the Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch Ilia II receives a delegation of experts from the Russian state consumer protection agency RosPotrebNadzor who are inspecting wine and mineral producer factories in Georgia as part of a process that may see the resumption of exports of Georgian wines and mineral waters to the Russian market
1 March 2013	Hundreds of people gather to commemorate in Yerevan the deadly clashes between protesters and security forces in 2008
1 March 2013	The Georgian Prime Minister's special representative for relations with Russia Zurab Abashidze meets in Prague with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin and says that Russia is considering easing visa rules for Georgian citizens, while progress has been made in restoring trade relations and transportation links between the two countries
2 March 2013	Supporters of the defeated presidential candidate Raffi Hovannisian gather in Yerevan to protest against the victory of Serzh Sarkisian in the last presidential election and declare Hovannisian as the true winner of the election
3 March 2013	The Georgian Dream parliamentary majority initiates amendments in the Georgian Parliament that foresee transferring the Intelligence Service from the President to the Prime Minister

Compiled by Lili Di Pippo

For the full chronicle since 2009 see www.laender-analysen.de/cad

ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Lili Di Puppò, Iris Kempe, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Natia Mestvirishvili, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines

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