



# RESEARCH PAPER

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## What future for Georgia?

by Pierre RAZOUX<sup>1</sup>

### Contents

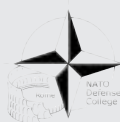
A catastrophic war with Russia .....	1
New red lines .....	2
The energy stakes .....	3
What future for Mikhail Saakashvili? .....	4
What are the options for Georgia? .....	5
What are the prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration? .....	7
The way forward .....	8

The severe political tensions that have flared up once again in Georgia, coinciding with the conduct of major Partnership for Peace exercises, barely six months after the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008 and a few months after NATO's 60th anniversary summit, raise questions as to Georgia's future, its government and its prospects of integration in the Euro-Atlantic community. What makes the issue all the more crucial is Georgia's key geostrategic position, notably as an energy transit country, linking East and West. It stands at the crossroads of two opposing axes of influence: the first, running north to south from Russia to Iran via Armenia; the second, west to east, connecting NATO countries to Central Asia via Azerbaijan. As a consequence, this paper sits the regional context before exploring options for Georgia.

### A catastrophic war with Russia

There is no point in going back over the reasons that drove each side to conflict, plunging Georgia and Russia into a war that after all was predictable, given the fierce nationalist sentiment on both sides and the lack of any hope of a political settlement to the frozen conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia<sup>2</sup>. The very least that one can say is that the war has been disastrous for Georgia.

The Georgian government still controlled a few enclaves in Abkhazia and South Ossetia before the war, but lost them during the hostilities. The result was an increase in the number of refugees, huddled together in wretched conditions on the outskirts of Tbilisi, Gori and Zugdidi<sup>3</sup>. The hostility between Georgians, Ossetians and Abkhazians has been exacerbated to such a point that the return of the two breakaway provinces to the Georgian fold now appears impossible,



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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this question, readers may like to consult the final chapter of my book (*La guerre d'août 2008*, pp. 303-337).

<sup>3</sup> Before the August 2008 war, Georgians controlled the Upper Kodori Valley in Abkhazia and several villages in the southern part of South Ossetia. The fighting drove 17,000 Georgians out of these two regions, increasing the number of refugees (250,000) who had been in Georgia since the 1991-1993 civil war (*Human Rights Watch* estimates).



certainly while Russia has military bases in the two enclaves and continues to recognize the Sukhumi and Tskhinvali authorities<sup>4</sup>.

Russia is now in a position to maintain a permanent presence along the Abkhazian littoral, an area that according to expert evaluations has unexplored offshore oil and natural gas reserves, and where Russia still maintains a number of sanatoriums as holiday resorts for its armed forces. Russia can thus secure the Sochi region (bordering on Abkhazia), where the 2014 Winter Olympics will be held, and start construction of a large naval base near Sukhumi. In this way, if tensions between Russia and Ukraine intensify and it becomes impossible for Moscow to keep its Black Sea Fleet in the Crimean port of Sevastopol, it can redeploy a portion of the fleet to Abkhazia. However, above all else it is this crisis that has marked Russia's impressive comeback on the geopolitical world stage.

The war, which resulted in heavy casualties and equipment losses, was a punishing blow for President Saakashvili: at least 450 Georgians killed or reported missing (228 civilians and 222 troops and police) and another 2,200 wounded, a third of them seriously<sup>5</sup>. The Georgian ground forces were trounced and lost 30% of their equipment. Three out of five brigades were virtually destroyed and the two most important bases in the country (Gori and Senaki) were totally devastated, the navy and coastguard service were annihilated and the air force is now a shadow of its former self. Over a thousand residential buildings were destroyed, worsening the acute housing shortage. Road infrastructure was also badly affected and the port of Poti was wrecked. The overall estimated cost of the war runs into tens of billions of dollars.

In political terms, Georgia's power and prestige were seriously undermined, particularly in the eyes of European public opinion. Many rejoiced that Georgia was not a NATO member, because otherwise the United States and Europe would have been at war with Russia under Article 5 (the mutual assistance clause) of the North Atlantic Treaty.

The conflict has further isolated Georgia. The country's relationship with Washington and with NATO remains close, but the Eastern European countries that were most sympathetic to Georgia have had to toe the line of European and Euro-Atlantic solidarity. Israel has also distanced itself from Georgia, so as not to endanger the good relations that Jerusalem intends to maintain with Moscow<sup>6</sup>. Even Ukraine, mired in an endless "gas war" with Russia, has had to slacken its ties with Tbilisi. Notwithstanding close personal ties between the two leaders<sup>7</sup>, President Viktor Yushchenko has refused to follow President Saakashvili's example and take his country out of the CIS<sup>8</sup>.

The Georgian president has achieved only three real political objectives as a result of the war: he has brought the Caucasian frozen conflicts to the forefront of the international stage; he has involved the European Union<sup>9</sup>, through the mediation of the French presidency of the EU and the decision by Brussels to send a military observer mission to Georgia; and he has rekindled acrimonious mistrust between NATO and Russia.

## New red lines

However, only a few weeks after the Russia-Georgia war, two events changed the balance of power in the South Caucasus: the election of Barack Obama as US president, and the world financial crisis, which caused oil and gas prices to plummet.

Even before taking office the newly elected American president alluded to the prospect that the US could have a more balanced relationship with Russia and Georgia. In December 2008, in view of the situation, NATO foreign ministers backed down on their decision to consider Georgia's status as official candidate for NATO membership<sup>10</sup>, though they did state their wish to strengthen ties between the Alliance and Tbilisi through a NATO-Georgia Commission, to be established in early 2009. As soon as he was installed in the White House,

<sup>4</sup> On 26 August 2008 the Russian authorities officially recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (going against the international community, which refuses to recognize the independence of the two provinces), though before then Russia had turned a deaf ear to repeated requests from Abkhazian and Ossetian secessionists. Russia had even signed several intergovernmental accords with Georgia (including an accord on 18 March 1996) recognizing Georgian sovereignty over the two contested provinces.

<sup>5</sup> A total of over one thousand died in the war, if one includes Russian, Abkhazian and Ossetian casualties.

<sup>6</sup> See Pierre Razoux: "The keys to understanding the Israel-Russia relationship" – *Research Paper 42*, NATO Defense College, Rome, November 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko is godfather to the youngest son of Mikhail Saakashvili.

<sup>8</sup> On 13 August 2008, Georgia left the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which it considered subservient to Russia.

<sup>9</sup> On 25 September 2008, Frenchman Pierre Morel was appointed EU special representative in Georgia to help Tbilisi to re-open dialogue with Moscow. On 1 October 2008, a detachment of 200 EU observers was sent to Georgia to monitor the ceasefire.

<sup>10</sup> At the NATO Bucharest Summit on 3 April 2008, the Heads of State and Government undertook in December 2008 to assess the progress made by Georgia and Ukraine with a view to accepting them as candidates for the *Membership Action Plan* (MAP).



President Obama offered Moscow an opportunity for dialogue and declared his willingness to promote a peaceful and pragmatic relationship with Russia in order to focus on the theatres that he believed to be crucial (Afghanistan-Pakistan, Iran, Israel-Palestine, Syria). The Caucasus, plainly, is not one of these. In February 2009, Mr Obama made a proposal to President Medvedev for the negotiation of a new relationship between the United States and Russia, based on a completely fresh look at all issues.

The Kremlin seized this opportunity and renewed its ties with both the United States and NATO. But Moscow has not had time to take advantage of the favourable climate and increase its influence in the South Caucasus: the world financial crisis, together with plummeting oil and gas prices, has hit Russia hard, considerably reducing its economic leverage and forcing it to direct its efforts towards tackling its domestic problems. Growing problems throughout Russia have undermined the Medvedev-Putin duumvirate<sup>11</sup>. The Russian government has continued to criticize the Western presence in Georgia and has voiced strong disapproval of the Partnership for Peace exercises taking place there since May 2009. At the same time it has built up the Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after signing a series of agreements with the leaders of the two separatist regions on 30 April 2009, entrusting Russia with defence of the "borders" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Indeed, there is every sign that the West and Russia have drawn new red lines in Georgia, in a return to the preventive defence logic that governed relations between presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin in the late 1990s. The situation can be summed up as follows: Russia has promised not to cross the Abkhazia and South Ossetia "borders" and not to threaten Georgia's existence as an independent state, while the West has agreed on the one hand to put pressure on the Georgian government to renounce use of force against Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and on the other not to install permanent NATO military bases in Georgia. Each side seems willing to respect the status quo, including in the energy domain, in the context of the "Pipeline Battle" between the West and Russia that has been waged in the region for the past ten years.

## The energy stakes

Georgia, like South Caucasus, is a transit country for Caspian Sea oil and gas exports<sup>12</sup>. It is traversed by two oil pipelines – the Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC)<sup>13</sup> as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline. There are plans to extend the BTE towards central Europe via the Nabucco gas pipeline project linking Turkey to Austria. For the past ten years the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union have invested colossal sums in the development of this energy network, which should enable them to shake off some of their dependence on Russia, Iran and unstable Middle East countries for fossil energy supplies. In the medium term, the BTC and the BTE should provide Europe with one third of its gas and oil supplies. It is therefore in Europe's interest to maintain stability in the South Caucasus, through both NATO and the EU, and to protect these two strategically important conduits.

Paradoxically, it is now Turkey, even more than the US, that needs to keep the BTC oil pipeline and the BTE gas pipeline open, as it tries to assert itself as the hub of European energy supply, whereas the US can always count on other supply routes and conduits. This is why, in the aftermath of the Russia-Georgia war last summer, Turkey launched the idea of a regional cooperation and stability pact between Turkey, the three South Caucasus states (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and Russia. It explains why it will become increasingly crucial in future for Americans and Europeans to monitor the way relations between Russia and Turkey develop. The two countries are already linked by the "Blue Stream" undersea gas pipeline, which should transport 16 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year from Russia to Turkey, starting in 2010.

In the same vein, Russia has developed its own network of oil and gas pipelines to carry Caspian oil and gas, notably via the new Baku-Novorossiysk oil pipeline. After its investments in the BTC project and failure to gain financial control of the Georgian energy distribution network, Russia seems to have accepted a sharing of roles in the great energy game being played in the region<sup>14</sup>. From this perspective, it is clear that the pipelines represent virtual red lines

<sup>11</sup> Marie Jégo, « Le pouvoir russe confronté aux effets de la crise », *Le Monde*, 7 February 2009.

<sup>12</sup> The Caspian oil deposits were initially estimated as 68 billion barrels of proven reserves and 240 billion barrels of probable reserves. They were then revised downwards (48 and 85 billion barrels respectively), but the Caspian is still very rich in oil. Production is projected as 3 million barrels a day by 2010. Natural gas reserves are estimated to increase to 10,000 billion cubic metres. These resources have the dual advantage of being of excellent quality and not being controlled by the OPEC member states.

<sup>13</sup> The BTC oil pipeline, 1,768 kilometres in length, connects the Baku port on the Caspian Sea to the Ceyhan port in the eastern Mediterranean. It runs through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, bypassing Armenia. It is supervised by an international consortium (AIOC) dominated by British and US oil companies. Inaugurated in 2006, it is designed to carry one million barrels of oil per day.

<sup>14</sup> Russia was initially hostile to this project for obvious reasons, but decided to invest money for keeping an eye on the project.



on the map of the Caucasus. When the Russians stopped their tanks only a few kilometres from the BTC during their offensive in Georgia, they knew exactly what they were doing.

## What future for Mikhail Saakashvili?

Since early April 2009, the Georgian president has faced a fresh rebellion in the ranks of the opposition who have called for his dismissal. On 5 May 2009, he had to deal with a mutiny in a military unit stationed at the Mukhrovani base, not far from Tbilisi, just when an important PFP exercise began in Georgia<sup>15</sup>. It was a very ugly situation, and many were quick to predict his political demise, and indeed his physical elimination. For was it not true that Dmitry Medvedev had called the president a “political corpse”?<sup>16</sup> These critics questioned Saakashvili’s ability to continue to rule his country after having committed such serious mistakes, not least in his mismanagement of the war with Russia. They also pointed out that political assassinations, particularly within ultranationalist factions, are a time-honoured tradition in the Caucasus<sup>17</sup>.

The Kremlin, however, has no interest in brutally eliminating the Georgian president. On the contrary, after discrediting him internationally, the Russian authorities have every interest in leaving him to tie himself in knots. By allowing the situation to deteriorate on its own, they hope the Georgians will get rid of him of their own volition. The Kremlin used the same strategy against President Viktor Yushchenko during the “gas war” in winter 2008-2009, when Ukraine lost credibility with the European states left without heating.

Ironically, President Medvedev’s verbal assaults actually strengthened Mikhail Saakashvili’s legitimacy, at least initially, and enabled him to face up successfully to the parliamentary commission of inquiry into the

reasons that he precipitously drove the country into war. President Saakashvili, whose political instinct is indisputable, knows that in Georgia no situation is irreversible. Eduard Shevardnadze, after all, remained in power for ten years after his humiliating defeat in Abkhazia in 1993, after his expulsion by force from Sukhumi, and after losing control of the province to Abkhazian separatists. There are only two things that Georgian public opinion would not forgive him: giving the order to open fire on the crowd and/or dragging his country into another civil war. If he manages to avoid these two pitfalls, there is no reason why Mikhail Saakashvili should not stay in power. He has sacked half his staff and all the ministers involved in the war of summer 2008. He has replaced two prime ministers in the space of a few months and appointed a government consisting of ministers who are totally devoted to him as well as far more experienced<sup>18</sup>. In doing so he has shown the might of his personal and unchallenged power. He has also reassured his interlocutors in other countries who reproached him for promoting only young and inexperienced politicians who were unable to engage with the Russian leadership.

By relying more and more on Vano Merabishvili, his Interior Minister, and on his security forces, but also on Giorgi Baramidze, his Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration (who is also godfather to his eldest son), President Saakashvili has consolidated his power and shielded himself against attempts at destabilization<sup>19</sup>, whether by Russia or by his still deeply divided opposition. Levan Gachechiladze<sup>20</sup>, his challenger in the last elections, is struggling to rally the reformists who have abandoned the president. Irakli Alasania<sup>21</sup>, the rising star of the opposition, has no popular base. Kakha Kukava<sup>22</sup> has not maintained cohesion in the democratic front after the demonstrations in April 2009 commemorating the 1989 massacre (in which twenty people were killed by the repressive Soviet regime). Nino Burjanadze<sup>23</sup> and

<sup>15</sup> It is still difficult to define today the reasons behind this rebellion, but such events occurred quite frequently in Georgia during the past 15 years, due to the poor conditions experienced by most of the servicemen.

<sup>16</sup> Statement reported by the *AFP* and *Reuters*, 2 September 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Former Republican candidate John McCain had offered the president a bullet proof vest during his courtesy visit to Tbilisi, hadn’t he? Was this to be interpreted as a humorous proposal or a sign that the American senator, an old hand at the game of international politics, did not think much of the hot-headed Georgian president’s chances against Russia or against the extremists on all sides who were baying for his blood?

<sup>18</sup> Since February 2009 the Georgian government has been led by Nikoloz Guilaouri, a 34-year-old economist who is very close to the president and has held several ministerial posts in previous governments.

<sup>19</sup> Drawing lessons from the Thailand crisis, the Georgian president pre-emptively deployed Interior Ministry security forces around Tbilisi international airport to prevent it from being seized by demonstrators.

<sup>20</sup> Levan Gachechiladze (age 44), a wealthy businessman who made his fortune in wine production, was runner-up in the presidential election on 5 January 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Irakli Alasania (age 35), a young diplomat and former ambassador to the United Nations, made a name for himself in the Georgian political class as president of the Abkhazian government in exile.

<sup>22</sup> Kakha Kukava (age 33) is a leader of the Conservative Party and took an active part in the Rose Revolution in November 2003. He gradually became one of the most radical opponents of Mikhail Saakashvili.

<sup>23</sup> Nino Burjanadze (44) is one of the three “historical” figures of the Rose Revolution, alongside Mikhail Saakashvili and Zurab Jvania (who died in accidental circumstances that have never been fully elucidated). She was speaker of the Georgian parliament from 2001 to 2008 before handing over to David Bakradze, a young politician deeply loyal to President Saakashvili. Coming from a family that was very close to the former regime, she has little to lose and refuses all compromise with the Georgian president.



Salome Zurabishvili<sup>24</sup>, who have each created their own party, both know that there is no room for two women at the forefront of the Georgian political stage. Paradoxically, President Saakashvili's chief opponents are all erstwhile allies who firmly supported him during his first mandate but since then have criticized his leadership style, which they consider authoritarian. They have pointed out that since the death of former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania<sup>25</sup>, who was his friend, mentor and the only person able to curb Saakashvili's populism, the Georgian president has become impervious to constructive criticism. The opposition leaders, however, lack charisma and are unable to agree on an alternative set of policies. They were unable to turn the situation to their advantage after having rallied more than 60,000 people (far more than during the Rose Revolution) on 26 May 2009 (Independence Day)! Taking the chance of this context, the Georgian Orthodox Church, headed by the highly influential patriarch Ilia II, is playing its own card by advocating rapprochement with Moscow and proposing the re-establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Georgia.

Lastly, another of the problems facing the Georgian president is his relatively young age. Now 41, he will be only 45 when his second mandate ends. Consequently, there is a risk that he will be strongly tempted to hang on to power, which he seems to have acquired a taste for<sup>26</sup>. He might follow the example of his neighbour Ilham Aliiev, who is only slightly older and, according to his adversaries, hopes to govern Azerbaijan indefinitely.

## What are the options for Georgia?

On the basis of a rational analysis, there are five possible scenarios. Of course, these five assumptions are not mutually exclusive and, as often proved to be the case, things will probably turn out differently. But it is always useful to establish a framework for analysis and structured thinking in order to identify the signs of change more easily.

- The first scenario is anchorage to the US<sup>27</sup>. This scenario envisages that, for a number of reasons

linked mainly to the worsening economic depression and the emergence of new crises that have sparked new tensions between Washington and Moscow, the US and some of their Western allies increase their presence in the South Caucasus in order to safeguard their Caspian oil and gas supplies. They deploy an enduring military presence to Georgia as a counterweight to the bases that Russia is building in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The White House takes under its wing a Georgian state that is now permanently bereft of its two breakaway provinces. This scenario, which would enable the Georgian president to exchange the unity of his country for durable security, is ultimately highly unlikely. Firstly, because the new US administration seems keen to promote rapprochement with Moscow. Secondly, by placing themselves totally in American and Western hands, Georgians would lose all hope of regaining the breakaway provinces. Lastly, the Georgians would eventually reject a Western military presence, felt to be too heavy, just as many times in the past they have rebuffed successive protectors.

- The second scenario envisages Georgia's return to the Russian sphere, either as the result of a "new Yalta" allowing Russia to recover its Caucasian back yard, or following the sudden overthrow of President Saakashvili<sup>28</sup>. The Kremlin then installs one of its own protégés at the head of the Georgian government, which sidelines the West, resumes CIS membership, and opens up another era of prosperous cooperation with Russia in exchange for the return of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Georgia. This was in fact the option advocated for ten years by Eduard Shevardnadze, with no success at all. It is a highly unlikely scenario, since President Obama seems reluctant to be drawn into a process of re-apportionment of areas of influence, preferring to distance himself from this type of ideological approach. Moreover, it is hard to imagine a "pro-Russian" candidate having the support of a fiercely nationalist Georgian population that is very hostile to Russia<sup>29</sup>. Resumption of direct control of Georgia by the Kremlin could then be achieved only by force, and in the current context, it

<sup>24</sup> Salome Zurabishvili (57), of French origin, held the post of Georgia's Minister of Affairs from March 2004 to October 2005 before joining the ranks of the opposition.

<sup>25</sup> The exact circumstances of Zurab Zhvania's "accidental" death were never determined and remain suspicious.

<sup>26</sup> Even if the Constitution does not allow him to run for a third term.

<sup>27</sup> This is one of the main argument hold by the Kremlin to justify its policy toward Georgia.

<sup>28</sup> This argument is frequently raised by Western countries which have invested a lot of money in the BTC to justify the need to back Georgia at any price.

<sup>29</sup> Polls show that, unlike Ukraine, where the population is equally divided between pro- and anti-Russians, 90 % of the Georgian population do not want to be back under Russia's domination.



is difficult to see the US and NATO accepting this without a qualm.

- The third scenario, far more credible, envisages a rebalancing of Georgian policy through the launching of regional cooperation. The business community, which has close ties with the Russian oligarchy, takes over the reins of power, maintains a resolutely reformist policy and embarks on gradual rebalancing of Georgian foreign policy. It launches economic cooperation and political dialogue with Russia, distances itself from the US without jeopardizing energy contracts, gives up NATO membership, encourages a stronger partnership with the European Union and revives the old idea of a “common house” with Georgia’s Caucasian neighbours<sup>30</sup>. While this option at first sight is a very attractive one, it has a major drawback for the Georgians: it does not solve the frozen conflicts.
- The fourth scenario gives priority to political reassurances and economic development. This is unquestionably the most reasonable option. In this scenario, the Georgian government unequivocally proclaims that it no longer wants to use force against breakaway provinces. It allows them to sink deeper into the morass of corruption and poverty. It accepts a stronger presence of international observers to monitor the Abkhazia and South Ossetia “borders”, reduces its military spending and devotes all its energy to the economic development of the country and the strengthening of democracy. Inevitably, Georgia’s progress throws into stark relief the deficiencies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Sooner or later, most probably after Mikhail Saakashvili’s time in power, the population of one or the other of the two provinces, frustrated by this dramatic difference in the quality of life and exasperated by an increasingly obtrusive Russian military presence<sup>31</sup>, realizes the importance of re-opening negotiations with Tbilisi. Georgians,

Abkhazians and Ossetians can then negotiate the most flexible kind of solution, allowing central government to retain only nominal sovereignty, reduced to its most basic form, and granting wide autonomy to Abkhazia and South Ossetia<sup>32</sup>. This assumption, however, conflicts with Russia’s apparent desire to retain control over the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

- The last scenario, which seems to be the most likely one in the long run, envisages maintenance of the status quo. Thus, President Saakashvili manages to stay in power, complete his second mandate and even perhaps to be re-elected for a third term of office. He maintains a staunchly pro-Western political stance and banks on Russia becoming exhausted, realizing that there is always the chance of a revolution there, especially if the authorities fail to make lasting improvements to the standard of living of their fellow citizens. For him, as for many experts, the Kremlin made a serious mistake in recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He proceeds to build up his army<sup>33</sup> in order to have the upper hand when Russia, for one reason or another, is forced to abandon the two breakaway provinces to their fate. At the same time, he pursues economic reforms and tightens his grip on power<sup>34</sup>. But for how long? Even if he succeeds in making significant improvements to the standard of living, the people will probably try to break free of his rule. And if he does not succeed, popular frustration and discontent may lead to even more demonstrations that could degenerate into clashes. Consequently, he could be tempted to shift towards policies based on a business oligarchy and an authentically authoritarian regime (the “Shevardnadze syndrome”) or to conduct another attack on the secessionist regions. In both scenarios, he would inevitably play into Russia’s hands.

<sup>30</sup> This is an old idea conceived by the Caucasian Mensheviks in the early 20th century and unsuccessfully taken up by Georgian presidents Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze.

<sup>31</sup> Speculation has it that the Abkhazian “president” Sergei Bagapsh is “annoyed” by the Russian military presence, which is building up every day and is no longer perceived as indispensable, since the Georgian threat has now disappeared. The Abkhazians seem to be aware of the Kremlin’s desire to actually annex Abkhazia, thus going against their desire for independence. The situation is not unlike the one that prevailed in the 19th century.

<sup>32</sup> The Georgian constitution of 24 August 1995, amended in 2004 and 2006, grants Abkhazia and Ajaria the status of autonomous region, but it cancelled the autonomous status that South Ossetia had enjoyed during the Soviet era. Unlike Abkhazia, whose cultural and linguistic specificity goes back to antiquity and has always been recognized by Georgian rulers, South Ossetia was artificially created by Stalin (who was Georgian) during the first half of the 20th century.

<sup>33</sup> Despite the financial crisis, the defence budget for 2009 is still 600 million dollars (ten times more than in 2003), 20% of the national budget. To this should be added the financial assistance provided by former President George W. Bush under the strategic partnership agreement signed by Washington and Tbilisi on 4 January 2009, only a few days before Bush left the White House.

<sup>34</sup> President Saakashvili stated in February 2009 that he wanted to conduct a “second revolution” to accelerate reforms and improve the daily lives of his fellow citizens. The following month, however, he had several opposition leaders arrested, condemned the main opposition leaders and launched into a systematic smear campaign against Nino Burjanadze.



## What are the prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration?

At their meeting in Strasbourg/Kehl on 4 April 2009, the Alliance heads of state and government reaffirmed Georgia's aspiration to join NATO one day<sup>35</sup>. The tone on that occasion was, however, far more guarded than in the Bucharest Summit Declaration: "We are maximising our advice, assistance and support for their reform efforts in the framework of the NATO-Ukraine Commission and NATO-Georgia Commission, which play a central role in supervising the process set in hand at the Bucharest Summit. We welcome in particular the planned reinforcement of NATO's Information and Liaison Offices in Kyiv and Tbilisi. Without prejudice to further decisions which must be taken about MAP, the development of Annual National Programmes will help Georgia and Ukraine in advancing their reforms. The annual review of these programmes will allow us to continue to closely monitor Georgia and Ukraine's progress on reforms related to their aspirations for NATO membership" (paragraph 29). "We strongly encourage Georgia to continue implementing all necessary reforms, particularly democratic, electoral, and judicial reforms, in order to achieve its Euro-Atlantic aspirations" (paragraph 31). It is no longer a question of fast-tracking Georgian membership (or, indeed, Ukraine's). Membership can only be granted after real, effective reforms. This process, as the drafters of the Declaration recognize, will undoubtedly take several years, unless of course in the meantime Georgia decides not to pursue membership.

While encouraging all participants in the Geneva talks (representatives of Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia and Ossetia) "to play a constructive role as well as to continue working closely with the OSCE, UN and the EU to pursue peaceful conflict resolution on Georgia's territory and that the Alliance heads of state and government are concerned by the continued tensions and violence along the administrative boundary lines and call on all parties to demonstrate restraint" (paragraph 32), the drafters of the Declaration implicitly state that Georgia will not be able to join NATO until it has found a peaceful negotiated solution to the disagreements between Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The heads of state who have met

President Saakashvili since last summer have clearly reiterated the same message to him. There should not, therefore, be the slightest ambiguity on this subject, which does, however, raise the vital question about the future role of Article 5 in a renewed Alliance. Mikhail Saakashvili sees indeed NATO membership as a mean to protect its country from Russia, not as a mean to boost internal reform and development.

Even if the Euro-Atlantic community is taking a firmer line with Georgia, it has nonetheless reiterated its "continued support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders" (paragraph 31). It has also condemned "Russia's recognition of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia as independent states" and has criticized "the build-up of Russia's military presence in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" (paragraph 34). These statements can be interpreted as a guarantee that NATO will not stand idly by in the event of a new Russian offensive on Georgian territory (except in Abkhazia and South Ossetia), on the express condition that there is no provocation by Georgia and that the Georgian government's good faith can be established. Once again, the red lines previously mentioned are reaffirmed. But there are still two big questions. How establishing the Georgian government's good faith? And how would NATO react if Russia were to cross the red lines again?

In any case, it is clear that for the Allies as a whole the Georgia question should not jeopardize dialogue and outreach towards Russia<sup>36</sup>. In other words, NATO does not intend to let Georgia fend for itself, but its priority is to re-establish good relations with Russia<sup>37</sup>. It is in this positive spirit that the Alliance's decision to conduct Partnership for Peace Exercise Cooperative Longbow in Georgia in May 2009, planned two years earlier, should be seen, even though it has aroused mistrust in Moscow<sup>38</sup>. The Georgians are not naïve. They fully understand the new situation, as is clear from recent articles published by Georgian research analysts<sup>39</sup>. Some of them have even created a centre for research and analysis on Russia in order to have a clearer understanding of how Russian power functions, thus filling a gap in a long-neglected area of expertise<sup>40</sup>. President Saakashvili and his inner

<sup>35</sup> Paragraph 29 of the Declaration states: "... we reaffirm all elements of that decision as well as the decisions taken by our Ministers of Foreign Affairs last December."

<sup>36</sup> The first sentence of paragraph 35 of the Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration is very explicit: "Despite our current disagreements, Russia is of particular importance to us as a partner and neighbour. NATO and Russia share common security interests."

<sup>37</sup> Karl-Heinz Kamp, "Relaunching NATO-Russia ties", *The Washington Times*, 15 March 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Monaghan, interviewed by Reuters, 6 May 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Kakha Imnadze, "NATO: Reality and Illusion – A linchpin in Georgian-Russian Relations", *Georgian Institute for Russian Studies*, 11 May 2009; Konstantin Zhgenti, "Realpolitik and the Georgian-Russian Relations", *Georgian Institute for Russian Studies*, 3 April 2009.

<sup>40</sup> The Georgian Institute for Russian Studies directed by Nikoloz Vashakidze ([www.girs.org.ge](http://www.girs.org.ge)), site in English, Georgian and Russian.



circle have indeed voluntarily neglected such vital expertise to focus more on euro-Atlantic integration.

## The way forward

In addition to existing cooperation programmes, there is one fundamental thing that Americans and Europeans can do for Georgians, and at a very small cost, in the framework of NATO, the EU and the OSCE. They can educate Georgians in order to bring about more rapid changes in mindset. Georgians must stop thinking of Westerners as their protectors, and instead should see them purely as partners. It is time for Georgians to think deeply and to sort out five crucial priorities: independence, unity, freedom, security and harmonious development. In the course of Georgia's long history these priorities, cherished by all peoples, have rarely gone hand in hand<sup>41</sup>. To this end, it is indispensable for Georgians to reflect long and hard on the notions of nationhood and ethnicity, like their president, whose description of Georgia as a "mosaic of peoples and influences with a multiple identity" is undoubtedly one of the best definitions of the country<sup>42</sup>.

To face these challenges, Georgia undeniably has a strong suit: solid culture and traditions that are a source of national cohesion, an enviable geographic location, enormous potential for tourism<sup>43</sup>, fertile lands and a highly educated population. Furthermore, it enjoys friendly relations with all its neighbours, except Russia, which has the power to cause it great harm. That is why Georgia has no choice but to mend its relations with Russia. It will be an uphill struggle, and, perhaps Georgia will have to

decide whether it is more important to keep Abkhazia or to keep South Ossetia. Although all the signs indicate that Russia is determined to keep control of Abkhazia, it is not certain that Moscow is equally keen to hold on to South Ossetia, which brings no essential benefits and is a drain on resources. So perhaps Georgia could envisage the following trade-off: recognition of Abkhazia's independence in exchange for South Ossetia's return to the Georgian fold?

The Western community could also develop projects to improve Georgia's economic situation. This would give Georgians something to hope for. Indeed, it is economic development that will make the country attractive both for foreign investors and for the Abkhazian and South Ossetian populations, who at the moment are extremely hostile to the idea of returning to the Georgian sphere. In this regard, the "Eastern Partnership" initiative launched by the European Union in May 2009 could bring Georgia closer to Europe, without generating undue opposition in the Kremlin. The European Union, indeed, is an attractive model for both Georgia and Russia.

In conclusion, we need to ask ourselves one last question which encapsulates all the others: are we moving towards rapprochement or towards new crises in Georgia? The reply to this will undoubtedly depend on changes in the international context and the outcome of the power games between Russia, the US and Europe. Ultimately, though, it will depend on the ability of whatever Georgian government is in power to promote a change in Georgian thinking, continue with reforms, strengthen democratization of political life, mend fences with Russia and provide reassurances to the West.

<sup>41</sup> Over the twenty-eight centuries of history since the establishment of the first kingdom of Colchide, Georgia has only been really independent, free and unified for an overall total of just over three centuries.

<sup>42</sup> Mikhail Saakashvili (with Raphaël Glucksmann), *Je vous parle de Liberté*, Paris, Hachette Littératures, 2008, p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> With its magnificent mountain scenery in the Great Caucasian Range, rising up to over 5,000 metres, Georgia could become a land of opportunity for quality ecotourism.