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## RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS

■ ANALYSIS		
	Russia and Georgia After Empire	2
	By Erik R. Scott, Berkeley, California	
■ TABLES AND DIAGRAMS		
	Statistical Data on Trade and Migration Between Russia and Georgia	6
■ A RUSSIAN VIEW		
	Russia Seeks to Promote Peace and Stability in the Caucasus	11
	By Sergei Markedonov, Moscow	
■ OPINION POLL		
	Russian Attitudes Towards Georgia	13
■ A GEORGIAN VIEW		
	Have Russian-Georgian Relations Hit Bottom or Will They Continue to Deteriorate?	15
	By Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi	
■ OPINION POLL		
	Georgian Public Opinion on Foreign Policy Issues	18

## Analysis

### Russia and Georgia After Empire

By Erik R. Scott, Berkeley, California

#### Summary

The present crisis between Russia and Georgia can best be understood by looking at the divergent views these two nations have taken of the Soviet past. The author examines the crisis as a post-imperial dilemma, in which tensions run high as both sides struggle to deal with the complicated legacy of a peculiar Soviet empire. The article stresses the role of historical memory of the Soviet past, which is present in the minds of actors on both sides of the conflict and indeed informs many of the actions that have been taken thus far.

#### The Legacy of Empire

Although it was avowedly anti-imperialist, many historians now consider the Soviet Union to have been a peculiar form of empire. The term is not simply used in a pejorative sense (as it was when U.S. President Ronald Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire”), but meant to denote a vast, multi-ethnic polity whose boundaries roughly ran along the same lines as those of the Russian Empire that preceded it, ruled by an exceedingly hierarchical system in which the most important political and economic choices of its constituent republics were decided in Moscow. Unlike other empires, the ethnic character of the Soviet Union’s hierarchy was highly ambiguous. While central institutions were based in Russia and Russian was the empire’s *lingua franca*, the Soviet Union’s elite was multiethnic, with membership in the Communist Party arguably counting for more than ethnic background. And so it was that the Soviet Union, a multiethnic empire unified by powerful political, economic, and cultural institutions subjugated to and centered in Moscow, was ruled for decades by a Georgian, Joseph Stalin.

When it existed, the Soviet Union was described in official rhetoric as a family of nations linked by bonds of friendship as well as by political unity. Each nation had its own characteristics and its own set of ascribed roles, which made the total of the Soviet family greater than the sum of its parts. While the demise of the Soviet state occurred over 15 years ago, the divorce proceedings of the now separated Soviet family are still underway, as longstanding political and cultural ties, fraught with emotional as well as economic meaning, are disentangled, and roles renegotiated. As fellow Orthodox Christians in the predominantly Muslim Caucasus, as prominent Soviet political leaders, and as entertainers famous among Russians for their food and song, hailing from a southern land with near mythical status as a Mecca for Soviet tourism,

the Georgians occupied a special place in the Soviet family. The memory of this former intimacy colors the current crisis in relations between the two nations, a post-imperial predicament in which the strong links of the Soviet empire are painfully but decisively being severed even as a resurgent Russia attempts to project its influence in Georgia and combat what it sees as the pernicious advances of the United States and NATO in the region. The present crisis, which has involved increasingly bellicose rhetoric, a severing of economic and diplomatic ties, and heightened tensions surrounding the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has occasioned not only a revisiting of the Soviet past in both Russia and Georgia but has drawn on a predominantly Soviet-era script as it has unfolded.

#### Historical Memory and Present Russian-Georgian Tensions

The present crisis between Russia and Georgia can be better understood by looking at the divergent views these two nations have taken of the Soviet past, with resentment at past hierarchies and perceived injustices prevalent in the Georgian post-imperial periphery even as nostalgia for the Soviet Union seems to be growing in the Russian post-imperial center. In May 2006, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili attracted international attention when he attended the opening of the new Museum of Soviet Occupation in Tbilisi. While the museum’s focus is on the Soviet repression of the independent Georgian state which existed from 1918 until the Red Army’s invasion in 1921, the term “occupation” in the museum’s name emphasizes the subjugation of Georgia to Soviet power in a larger sense, an injustice that perhaps stretched through the entire Soviet period and one that some Georgians see contemporary Russia as attempting to perpetuate. The museum’s opening attracted scorn and ridicule in the Russian press, and was directly

criticized by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who in an online interview given in July 2006 rhetorically inquired “who occupied whom,” when under Stalin “the entire leadership of the Soviet Union was practically made up of people from the Caucasus” and “all security organs in the Caucasus headed by Georgians,” as well as “nearly all those [security organs] of other national republics.”

Putin’s reference to the Georgian origins of Stalin and others in his immediate circle comes at a time when the Russian state is in the process of selectively reclaiming symbolic aspects of the Soviet past, including the music of the Soviet national anthem (albeit with new lyrics) and the Soviet-era red star for the Russian army. Foreign dignitaries on hand for the sixtieth anniversary celebration of Soviet victory in World War II, held in Moscow in May 2006, saw marchers don a panoply of Soviet-era costumes, perhaps reflecting a belief among the Putin administration that the triumph over fascism, celebrated in Soviet times, might be embraced as the greatest enduring achievement of the Soviet Union.

If Putin hoped the commemorations would serve as a common rallying point for the independent nations and diverse ethnic groups which inhabit Russia and the other Soviet successor states, he was certainly dismayed by the absence of Estonia and Lithuania at the celebration, for whom Soviet triumph was followed by Soviet occupation, and by Georgian President Saakashvili’s decision to not attend the event in protest over the failure of Russia to agree to his proposed timetable for military withdrawal from Georgia.

### **Russia’s Selective Reading of History: Glorification of the Past**

Although the ethnically mixed character of the Soviet leadership complicates Russian claims to the mantle of successor to the Soviet Union, selective historical memory might make it possible for Russia to ignore the less savory aspects of the Soviet past or simply label them as non-Russian. By emphasizing the Georgian character of Stalin, Lavrentii Beria, and others in the security services during the Soviet Union’s most repressive years, Soviet excesses can be attributed to ethnic outsiders. When Putin described the arrest of four Russian officers in Georgia on spy charges in September 2006 as a “sign of the political legacy of Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria,” he simultaneously associated the Georgians with one of their most infamous co-ethnics before an international audience while also distancing Russia from some of the most flagrant crimes of the Soviet past. This complicated past, and its divergent interpretations, remains remarkably pres-

ent in the minds of actors on both sides of the current crisis.

In the Soviet era, Georgians were well-known as prominent artists and entertainers, and famous for their food, the ethnic cuisine of choice in the Soviet Union and one inevitably paired with Georgian wine. Another popular stereotype common in Soviet humor and anecdotes, and one which may have, to a limited extent, reflected reality, was that of Georgians as well-placed in the world of organized crime and corruption. The economic turmoil which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing civil war which engulfed Georgia in the early 1990s led thousands of Georgians to seek work in Russian cities. With their arrival, the number of Georgian restaurants in Moscow and St. Petersburg skyrocketed, and many Georgian artists either took up residence in Russia or toured there frequently since earning a living in Georgia became ever more difficult. And, if Russian press reports are to be believed, Georgians came to occupy an even more important position in Russia’s criminal underworld. Yet the prominence of Georgians in such positions—licit and illicit—a combination of their ethnic distinctiveness and occupational specialization (it is common for diaspora groups to seek out professional niches) and the persistence of Soviet-era stereotypes (and, perhaps, the ability of some Georgians to capitalize on them for profit and prestige), obscures the fact that most Georgian migrants work in more mundane professions.

### **Russian Sanctions Against Georgia: Following a Soviet Script**

Monetary remissions sent by Russia’s Georgian diaspora to friends and family members in Georgia are rightly seen as a major source of economic stability for the South Caucasus nation. Interestingly, recent Russian reprisals against Georgia not only targeted the Georgian diaspora in general terms by imposing visa restrictions and enforcing tough immigration rules but have specifically taken aim at those specialized roles for which Georgians were famous in the Soviet period. In pursuing this course of action, it is as if Russian authorities are referring to a decades-old Soviet script. In spring 2006, Russia instituted a ban on Georgian wine and mineral water, allegedly on health grounds, depriving Georgian entrepreneurs of their ability to deliver two of Georgia’s best known products to the lucrative Russian market. In October 2006, following the spy row between Russia and Georgia, authorities in Moscow began targeting Georgian-operated businesses, amidst frequent reports on state television that Moscow was in danger of being

overrun by the “Georgian mafia.” In several instances, Russian law enforcement authorities searched and inspected some of Moscow’s most popular Georgian restaurants. Georgian entertainers also came under fire in the Russian capital, with authorities deciding to cancel a performance of the Georgian State Dance Ensemble in light of new visa restrictions on Georgians. The very roles ascribed for Georgians in the Soviet “family of nations” have come under attack, revealing the complex imperial legacy of interdependence between the two nations that makes separation such a difficult and painful process.

Even as the harsh actions taken against the Georgian diaspora by the Russian authorities, measures which include ethnic profiling, harassment, and deportation, have drawn on Soviet-era tendencies and stereotypes, they have also touched on a more recent strain in Russian society of xenophobia in general and distrust of Caucasian migrants more generally. In a way perhaps ironic to those outside the region, people from the Caucasus are crudely referred to as “blacks” by racist Russians. Much as Britain and France have struggled with the arrival of migrants from their former colonies, the years following the Soviet collapse have seen the arrival in Russian cities of many migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia seeking work and social betterment. This migration, combined with ongoing conflict in Chechnya and a resurgent ethnic Russian nationalism has placed renewed emphasis on the otherness of those with Caucasian heritage, even if these “blacks” were once part of the Soviet family and many are in fact Russian citizens.

### Restoring an “Informal Empire”?

While Russia’s wielding of its economic might to project its influence and construct what some describe as an informal or “liberal” empire in the former Soviet space are the subject of much discussion, it remains unclear whether such a project is driven by economic goals, political considerations, nostalgia for the Soviet empire, or some combination of the three. Such a lack of clarity of purpose makes Russia’s long-term goals unclear. Russian bans on Georgian products and the Russian decision to sever transport links with its southern neighbor have negatively impacted the Georgian economy in the short run, but in the long run will force Georgians to seek new markets for their goods outside Russia. Similarly, Russian energy giant Gazprom’s move in December 2006 to double natural gas prices for Georgia certainly ramps up the pressure on Georgia’s government but also increases the incentive for the Georgian authorities to diversify their energy supply, which they have sought to do in

recent discussions with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran. Thus far, Russia’s actions have damaged the prospects for profitable trade with Georgia, rallied the Georgian people around a Georgian government beset in the past year by several domestic scandals, and attracted the critical gaze of the international community. While future developments may yet show Russia’s strategy to be an effective one, for now Russia’s actions seem to reveal the legacy of a system in which commands, punishments, and rewards were handed down a hierarchical chain from on high in Moscow.

### Russia and the Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Russian involvement in breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two self-proclaimed statelets which seek independence from Tbilisi, has proved to be perhaps the greatest irritant in Russian-Georgian relations. Russian economic activity in the two territories is essential for sustaining the de facto authorities there, and the incorporation of the unrecognized statelets into the Russian Federation has been discussed in the Russian Duma despite Russia’s official promise to respect the territorial integrity of Georgia. Yet, here too Russia’s long-term goals and motivations seem unclear. Russia’s current ban on agricultural imports from Georgia recently prevented a large shipment of tangerines originating in South Ossetia from entering the Russian Federation, leading to a protest by merchants and truckers from South Ossetia who felt the ban should not extend to them. It remains unclear how evenly Russia will enforce the ban, but further moves like this one could build resentment toward the Russian authorities among residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition, while discussion of incorporating the two breakaway territories into the Russian Federation worries the Georgian authorities and causes unrest among an international community intent on reaching a settlement in Kosovo (a case which some Russian policymakers have likened to that of the two unrecognized statelets), the redrawing of international borders could prove unsettling for Russia, with its numerous and ethnically diverse autonomous regions and its ongoing efforts to subdue violence in Chechnya, another territory with a claim on independence.

Yet in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Soviet imperial legacy also weighs on Georgia. Although historically enjoying ties with Georgia, Abkhazia was initially granted the status of a union republic by the Soviet authorities until being made an autonomous republic within Georgia by Stalin in 1931. The downgrading of the territory’s status by

Stalin and the subsequent encouragement of Georgian migration to Abkhazia by Beria are decisions that may have been made in the interests of Soviet state centralization but are seen by many Abkhaz as the nationalist actions of Georgians who happened to occupy top Soviet positions. The ethnic balance in Abkhazia and South Ossetia during the Soviet period was a delicate issue, as both regions had large populations of not only Abkhaz and Ossetes but also of Georgians, Russians, Armenians, and others. It is arguable that such multiethnic polities had a better chance of surviving in a larger empire where their existence was not so anomalous than within the confines of an independent Georgia. At the advent of Georgian independence in 1991, authorities and titular ethnic groups in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia feared domination by Georgians in a predominantly Georgian state, an understandable anxiety given official proclamations of exclusive Georgian nationalism in the early 1990s. Ongoing conflict has forced many Georgians to flee the two breakaway territories. The remaining population in the two areas, while seemingly still desirous of autonomy, has turned to Russia as the successor to the overarching Soviet state as protector of their fragile independence and most in the statelets speak Russian, use the Russian ruble, and have accepted Moscow's offer of Russian citizenship. When addressing the issue of the breakaway regions, Georgia must grapple with a complex past in which Soviet policies both served to incorporate Georgia into a larger Soviet empire while also grouping ethnically diverse regions under the auspices of a Georgian republic. After empire, the territorial dimensions of the Georgian state remain unclear and unresolved.

### A Conflict of Emotions

Finally, the post-imperial aspect of the crisis of Russian-Georgian relations gives the situation an emo-

tional tenor in which symbolic gestures and rhetoric are extremely important. Cases of spying routinely emerge around the world, but Georgia's decision to parade four Russian officers charged with spying on national television reflected the confrontational and perhaps overconfident attitude of a newly independent nation asserting itself against the former imperial center. This move outraged Russian sensibilities, provoking anger that Russian citizens could be treated in such a rough manner by a small former Soviet "brother" republic. Russia's response was similarly disproportionate, revealing wounded national pride and culminating in a vengeful attempt to punish its neighbor for courting NATO and for directly challenging Russia in such a manner.

Emotions aside, the geopolitical factors which gave rise to Russian-Georgian tensions remain. Russia is understandably interested in maintaining security at its borders and preserving its traditional sphere of influence in the Caucasus while Georgia seeks to consolidate centralized control of its territory and pursue new opportunities in partnership with the United States, the European Union, and NATO. Yet past resentments, wounded pride, and a failure of these nations to enter into calm, neighborly relations as sovereign states on equal footing—all part of the imperial legacy—causes emotions to run high, making the situation much more incendiary than it might otherwise be. Inability to deal with the Soviet imperial legacy will hinder chances at a more neutral dialogue between the two nations, leaving tensions to simmer even as upcoming presidential elections in Russia and Georgia might tempt candidates in each country to play upon lingering resentments for political gain.

#### *About the author*

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## Tables and Diagrams

### Statistical Data on Trade and Migration Between Russia and Georgia

Table 1: Russia's Foreign Trade with CIS Countries (Mln. USD)

	1995	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
<b>Export</b>							
<b>CIS states</b>	<b>14,530.0</b>	<b>13,824.0</b>	<b>14,617.0</b>	<b>15,711.0</b>	<b>20,498.0</b>	<b>29,375.0</b>	<b>32,594.0</b>
Azerbaijan	85.6	136.0	133.0	277.0	410.0	621.0	858.0
Armenia	127.0	27.5	75.5	94.5	126.0	135.0	191.0
Belarus	2,965.0	5,568.0	5,438.0	5,922.0	7,602.0	11,143.0	10,094.0
Georgia	48.9	42.3	58.2	91.4	153.0	230.0	353.0
Kazakhstan	2,555.0	2,247.0	2,778.0	2,403.0	3,279.0	4,645.0	6,526.0
Kyrgyzstan	105.0	103.0	83.3	104.0	161.0	266.0	397.0
Moldova	413.0	210.0	240.0	269.0	306.0	372.0	448.0
Tajikistan	190.0	55.9	69.4	67.9	128.0	183.0	240.0
Turkmenistan	93.1	130.0	140.0	143.0	222.0	242.0	224.0
Uzbekistan	824.0	274.0	409.0	453.0	512.0	767.0	861.0
Ukraine	7,149.0	5,024.0	5,282.0	5,885.0	7,595.0	10,771.0	12,403.0
residual	-25.6	6.3	-89.4	1.2	4.0	0.0	-1.0
<b>Import</b>							
<b>CIS states</b>	<b>13,592.0</b>	<b>11,604.0</b>	<b>11,202.0</b>	<b>10,163.0</b>	<b>13,139.0</b>	<b>17,733.0</b>	<b>18,926.0</b>
Azerbaijan	107.0	135.0	81.1	86.8	93.0	136.0	206.0
Armenia	75.1	44.0	51.8	56.6	78.7	73.7	101.0
Belarus	2,185.0	3,710.0	3,963.0	3,977.0	4,880.0	6,463.0	5,714.0
Georgia	57.9	76.6	83.4	69.0	84.2	107.0	158.0
Kazakhstan	2,675.0	2,200.0	2,018.0	1,946.0	2,475.0	3,479.0	3,209.0
Kyrgyzstan	101.0	88.6	61.9	74.2	104.0	150.0	145.0
Moldova	636.0	325.0	347.0	281.0	403.0	496.0	548.0
Tajikistan	167.0	237.0	130.0	66.0	69.9	75.9	94.9
Turkmenistan	179.0	473.0	39.1	32.1	28.4	43.2	77.1
Uzbekistan	889.0	663.0	584.0	344.0	484.0	612.0	904.0
Ukraine	6,617.0	3,651.0	3,845.0	3,230.0	4,437.0	6,096.0	7,777.0
residual	-97.0	0.8	-2.3	0.3	1.8	1.2	-8.0

Source: Rosstat, Russian Federal Service for Statistics, [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru)

Diagram 1: Georgia's Share in Russian Exports to the CIS (2005; mln. USD)

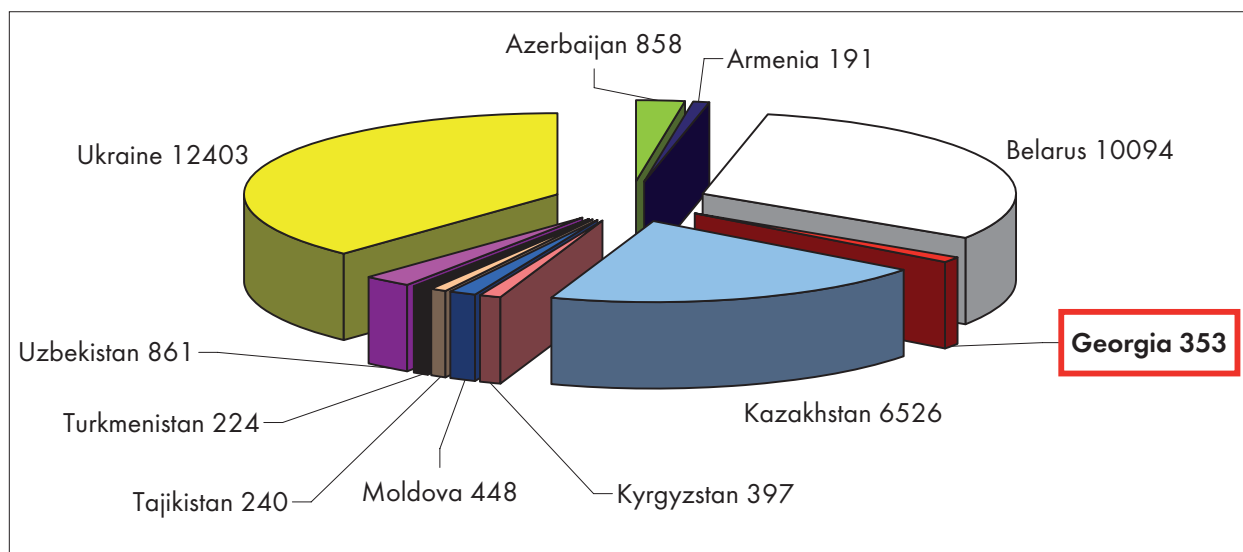
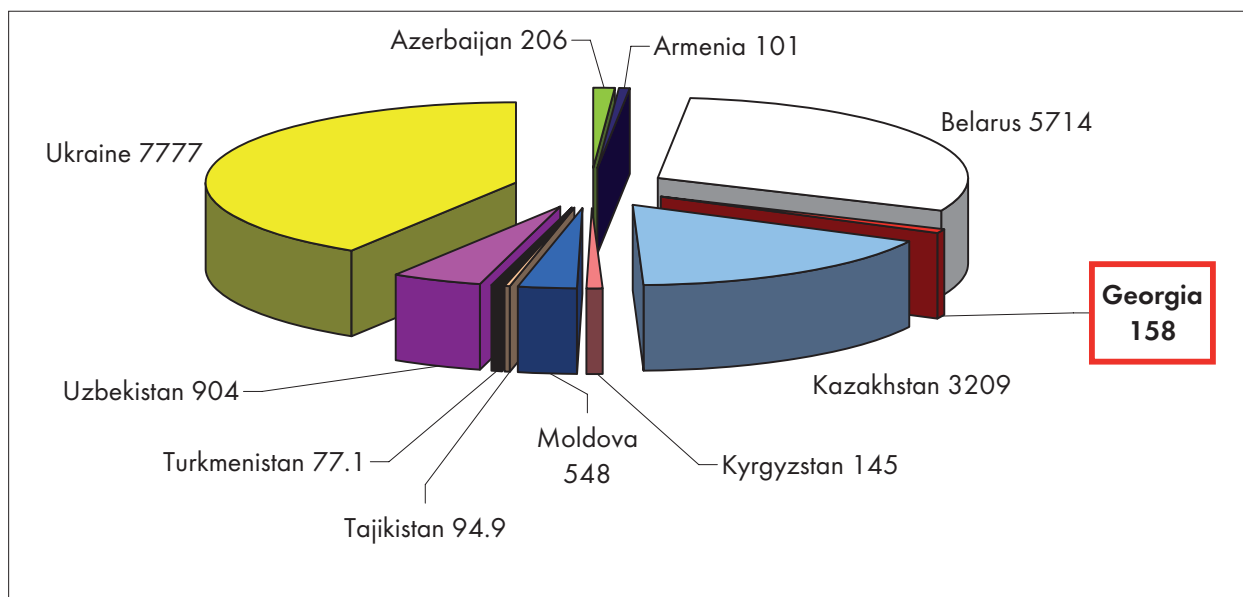
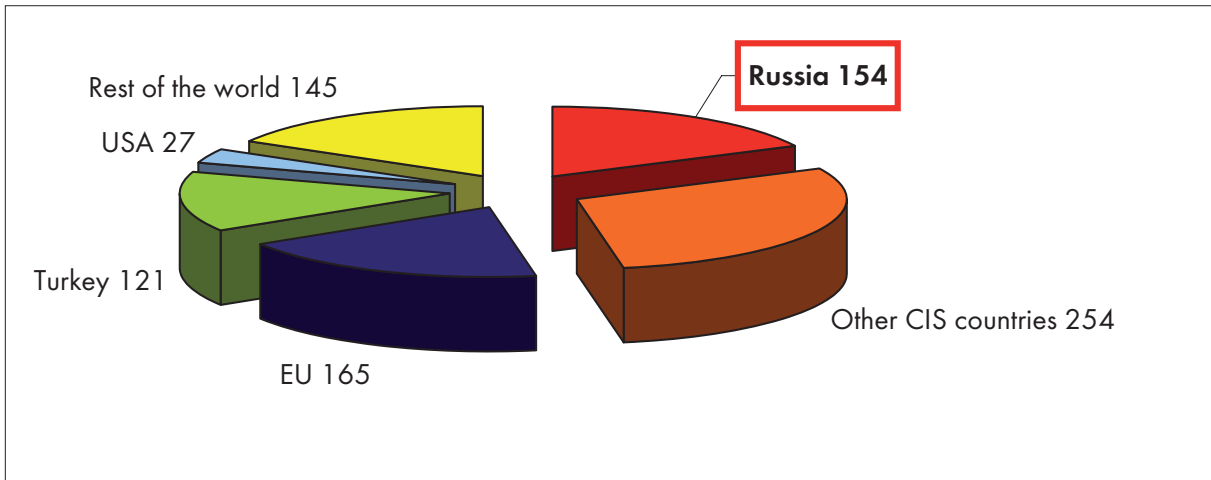


Diagram 2: Georgia's Share in Russian Imports from the CIS (2005; mln. USD)



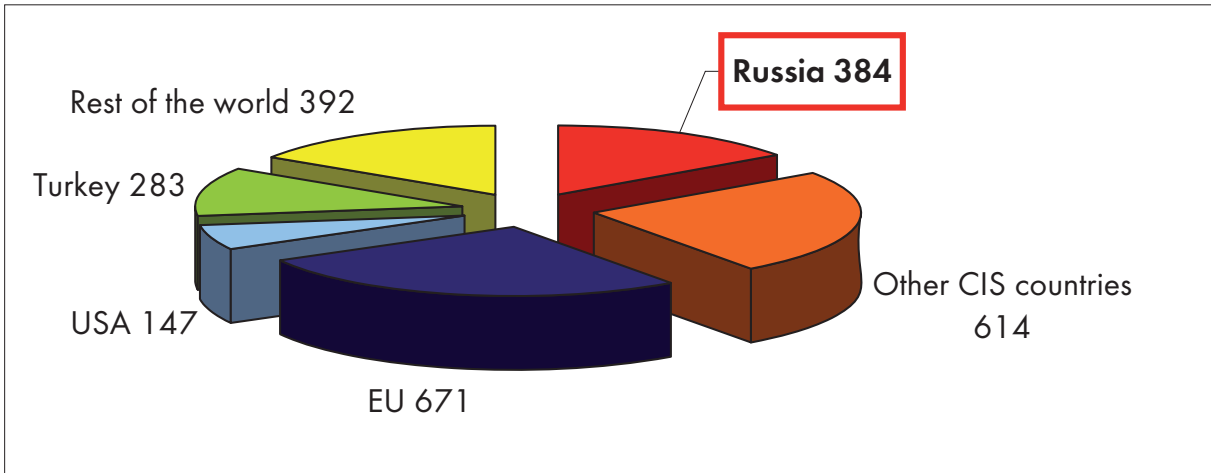
Source: Rosstat, Russian Federal Service for Statistics, [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru)

Diagram 3: Russia's Share in Georgian Total Exports (2005; mln. USD)



Source: Georgian State Department for Statistics, <http://www.statistics.ge/main.php?pform=62&plang=1>

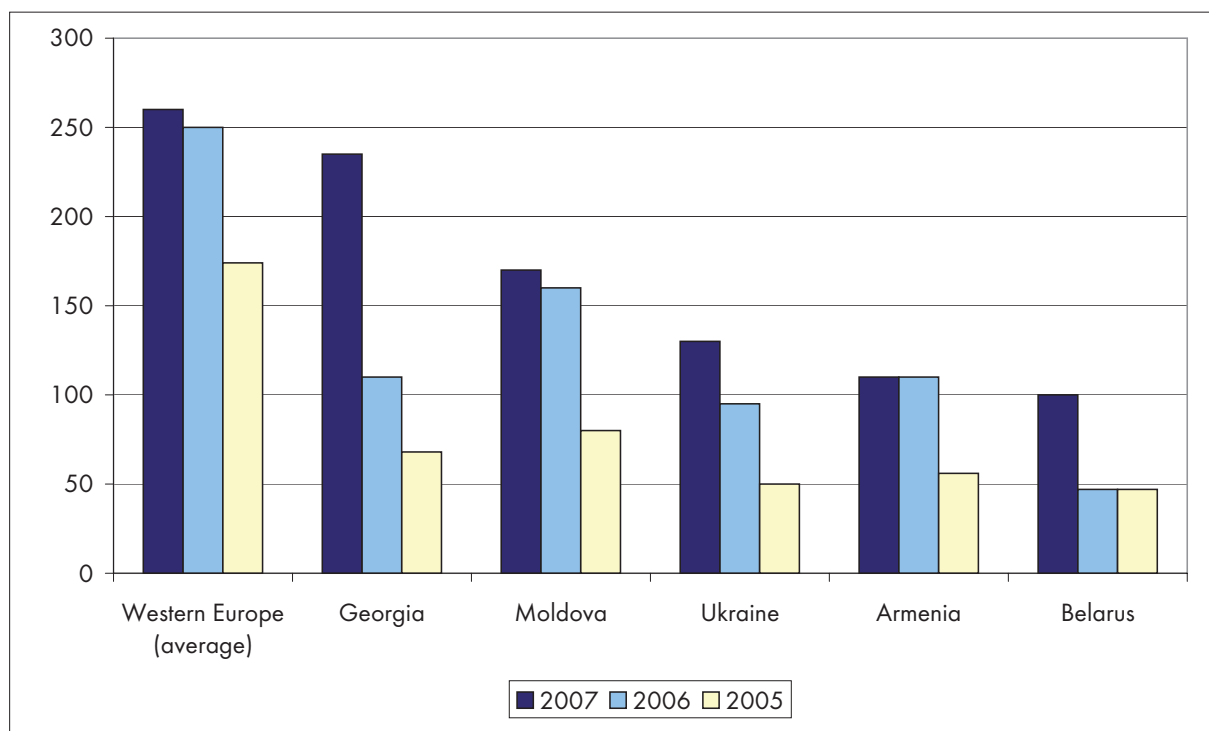
Diagram 4: Russia's Share in Georgian Total Imports (2005; mln. USD)



Source: Georgian State Department for Statistics, <http://www.statistics.ge/main.php?pform=62&plang=1>

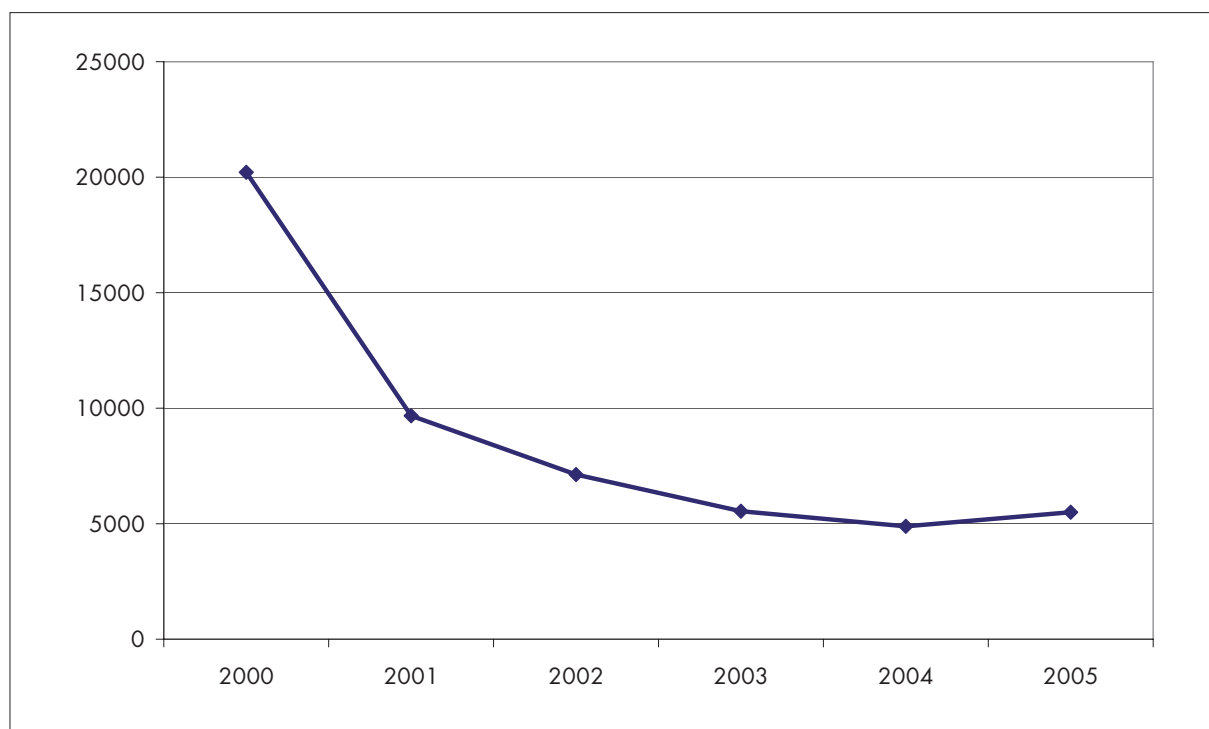


Diagram 5: Russian Contract Prices for Natural Gas Deliveries (USD per 1000cm)



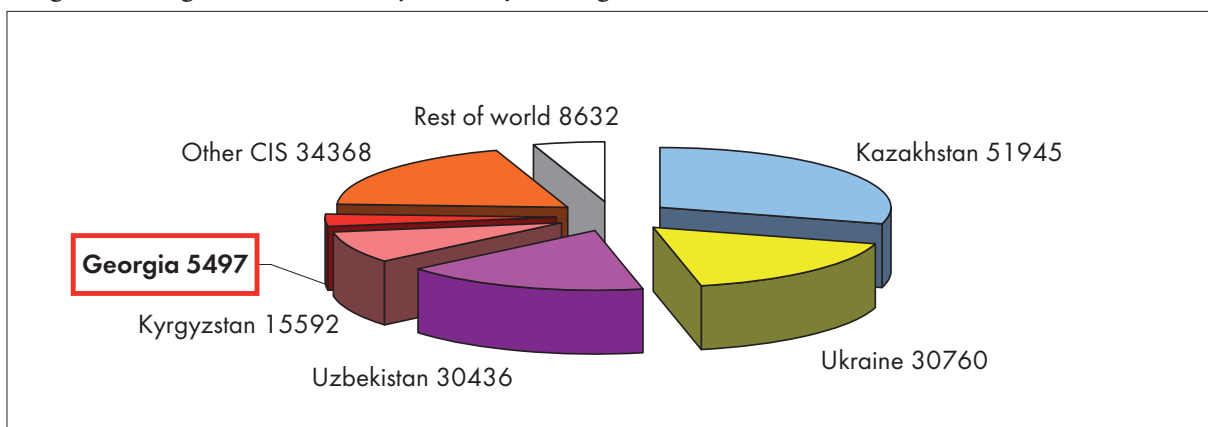
Source: BOFIT weekly 1/2007, <http://www.bofi.fi/bofiit/eng/3weekly/w07/w012007.pdf>

Diagram 6: Migration from Georgia to Russia



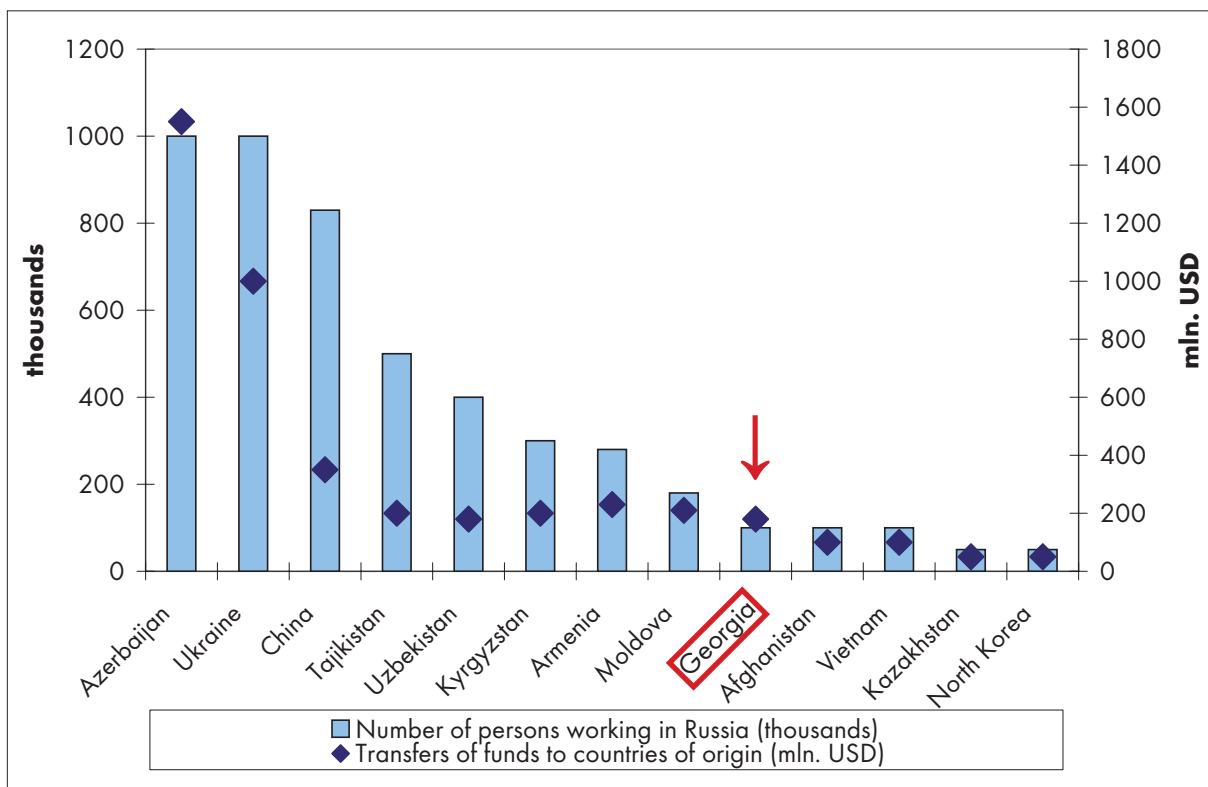
Source: Rosstat, [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/2006/b06\\_11/05-09.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/2006/b06_11/05-09.htm)

Diagram 7: Migration to Russia by Country of Origin (2005)



Source: Rosstat, [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/2006/b06\\_11/05-09.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/2006/b06_11/05-09.htm)

Diagram 8: Financial Transfers of Labor Migrants from Russia to their Home Countries (2005)



Source: expert estimates, Center for Ethnopolitical and Regional Studies, Moscow

## A Russian View

### Russia Seeks to Promote Peace and Stability in the Caucasus

By Sergei Markedonov, Moscow

#### Summary

Georgia and Russia have a long history of close relations that soured in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet eras. Georgia blames many of its problems on the Russians. Because Russia is not ready for a unilateral exit from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia has opted for a strategic relationship with the US. Despite the antagonism of Georgian leaders, Russia has a vital interest in what happens in and around Georgia since the stability of the Russian North Caucasus and the integrity of Russia depend on events there. Russia can play a useful role in the “frozen conflicts” of the region through the provision of peacekeepers, which have the strong support of the ethnic minorities living in Georgia.

#### A Broader Context for Georgian-Russian Relations

Relations between Georgia and Russia are one of the most problematic aspects of politics in the Caucasus. The erstwhile “fraternal” republic has become for Moscow the most inconvenient and disagreeable partner among all the CIS countries. Today many Russian and foreign experts are concerned about the insistence with which Russia seeks to preserve its political dominance in this part of the post-Soviet space.

Russian relations with Georgia must be seen within a wider context. At the beginning of the 1990s, Russia gave up its territorial claims to Ukraine and Kazakhstan without wavering even though, in ethnic and cultural terms, the northern and eastern parts of Kazakhstan and the Crimea were much closer to Russia than Georgia. Russia’s policies toward the Baltic states were even more passive despite the large ethnic Russian communities in Latvia and Estonia. Compared to the South Caucasus, Russia is much less involved in the political processes in Central Asia. In 2001, Russia approved the American intervention into the region and now is not putting up much resistance to China’s “assimilation” of the territory. In the case of Transnistria, the Russian Federation is ready for an internationalization of the conflict resolution process.

The South Caucasus, and Georgia above all, is different. Here Russian foreign policy-makers are only ready for small concessions and compromises, seeking to preserve their exclusive role in the resolution of the “frozen conflicts,” and will not allow other “honest brokers” to become involved.

#### Problems Despite Years Together

Russian-Georgian relations have a paradoxical character. On one hand, there are strong tradi-

tional ties, particularly social-cultural, between the two countries. Moreover, over the course of 200 years, Georgia was part of a common state with Russia. Its political class was incorporated into the Russian elite (from the Bagrationi family to Shevardnadze). On the other hand, there is the weight of mutual claims against each other from the perestroika and post-Soviet periods.

The April 1989 events in Tbilisi, in which the soldiers of the Transcaucasus Military District dispersed a demonstration, was one of the catalysts for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Georgia’s acquisition of sovereignty coincided with a parallel growth of anti-Russian feelings. For Yeltsin-era Moscow, Eduard Shevardnadze was above all a colleague of the “hated Gorbachev.” As a result, Russian leaders of that time looked on all of Shevardnadze’s actions as potentially inimical.

#### Georgia Blames Russia for Its Problems

It seemed that the rise to power of Mikheil Saakashvili, having overthrown the “White Fox,” should have substantially transformed relations between our countries. However, the leader of the Rose Revolution began his policy of restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity with a search for an external enemy to blame for the collapse of the Georgian state. With this approach, post-Soviet Georgia’s responsibility for the multi-ethnic conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was transferred to Russia. In this way, the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts became Russian-Georgian conflicts.

Among the Georgian elite, the idea of fleeing the Russian empire became seen as the principle precondition for the liberalization of the country, and its ability to join the “civilized world” and the “west.”

Accordingly, the “young Georgian democracy” could only overcome its conflict with Moscow by gaining the full support of the US, European countries, and international organizations (above all NATO), according to the ideologists of Georgian independence. Such partners would presumably bring Georgia internal stability and restore calm.

### Saakashvili's Western Priorities

The current Georgian leader became president on a revolutionary wave of hope for a quick resolution of the problem of the separatist territories, resettling refugees from Abkhazia, and an end to the national humiliation caused by these conflicts. Now Mikheil Saakashvili must pay back the political credits he has received and strengthen his reputation as a patriot and defender of “Georgian unity.”

In the battle to restore Georgia, he acts like a pragmatic politician. If in achieving this goal he can use the political resources of Russia, then he is ready to become a pro-Russian politician. But since Russia is not ready for a unilateral exit from Abkhazia and South Ossetia (without a full resolution of the conflict), Saakashvili opted for strategic partnership with the USA.

However, it might turn out that the US and Russia have common interests in stabilizing the situation in Georgia. The format of Russian-American relations in recent years makes it possible to think along these lines, however, it is obvious that neither the US nor the European Union has developed plans for removing their presence in the Caucasus, at least before the resolution of the intra-Georgia conflicts. Even the idea of a quickened entry of Georgia into the North Atlantic alliance is not accepted by all members of NATO (the US is an influential member of this organization, but hardly the only one).

### Russian Security Depends on the Caucasus

Despite this, Russia remains one of the most important gravitational centers of the Caucasus. It is objectively interested in the existence of a unified, open, and friendly Georgia. Just as Tbilisi seeks to preserve its unity and territorial integrity, Russia would benefit from a neighbor capable of preventing part of its territory from being turned into a base for terrorists. A separate question is whether the return of Georgia's separatist territories should be achieved at any price, particularly with the use of “iron and blood.”

The Caucasus is a unified social-political organism despite the borders tyrannically imposed on it by the Bolsheviks. Any conflict beginning in

the South Caucasus might continue in the Russian North Caucasus. Russian dominance of the South Caucasus is not a question of its “imperial resurrection.” Securing stability in the former republics of the South Caucasus is a principle condition for the peaceful development of Russia itself and the preservation of the state's integrity.

Russia is a Caucasus state. This thesis is not a beautiful metaphor. Seven Russian regions are located in the North Caucasus and an additional four are on the steppe abutting the Caucasus. The territory of the Russian North Caucasus is larger than the size of the independent states of the South Caucasus.

Almost all of the ethno-political conflicts in Southern Russia are closely connected to the conflicts in the former Soviet Transcaucasus republics. The Georgian-Ossetian standoff led to a flow of refugees from the former South Ossetia autonomy and other parts of Georgia to the neighboring North Ossetia in Russia. The reconstruction of the Transcaucasus republics into independent “fraternal republics” took place in part by squeezing the Ingush from the Prigorodny district. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict made possible the consolidation and radicalization of the Adyg ethno-national movement in Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Adygeya, activating the Confederation of Caucasus Peoples, which became one of the chief actors in the Georgia-Abkhazian standoff. The removal from Georgia of the Kvarelsky Avars at the beginning of the 1990s led to the knotted conflicts in Northern Dagestan. The mountain-dwelling Avars sent to the Kizlyar and Tarumov raions of Dagestan came into conflict with the Russians and flat-land dwelling Nogai. As a result there was a significant outflow of Russians from the northern parts of Dagestan. Resolving the “Chechen Question” depends crucially on stabilizing the situation in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. Thus, it is impossible to provide security in the Russian Caucasus without stability in Georgia.

### Russia Plays a Useful Role in Conflicts

One can criticize Russia for supporting Abkhaz separatism, but the pro-Russian feelings among the vast majority of Abkhaz society and their resistance to any but Russian soldiers as peacekeepers is a fact which cannot be ignored. As a result, there are simply no pro-Georgian politicians in Abkhazia. Moreover, the Abkhaz authorities in exile are led by ethnic Georgians.

The situation is slightly different in South Ossetia. Here there are pro-Georgian politicians (Dmitry and Vladimir Sanakoevy, Uruzmag Karkusov), though

their political motivations raise many questions. Dmitry Sanakoev, currently the “alternative” South Ossetian president, and Karkusov participated in the Georgian-Ossetian military conflict of 1990–1992. At the same time, while the Georgian leadership is prepared to engage in negotiations about an increased status for Abkhazia within Georgia (while the Abkhaz leaders seek full independence), their position toward South Ossetia is different. Until now the Georgian authorities insist on calling South Ossetia “Tskhinvalsky Region” and refuse to cancel the Zviad Gamsakhurdia-era (1990) order liquidating the South Ossetian autonomy. Effectively this decree realized the policy once described by Gamsakhurdia as “In Georgia there are Ossetians, but there is no Ossetia.” The popularity among the residents of South Ossetia of Eduard Kokoity, the current leader of this *de facto* state, secures a similar course by official Tbilisi.

The ethnic minorities living in Georgia are interested in a continued Russian presence in Georgia and view the Russian peacekeepers as a guarantee of their security. While the decision to withdraw the Russian bases from Georgia has already been made, hastily removing the Russian peacekeepers from South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be premature.

*About the author*

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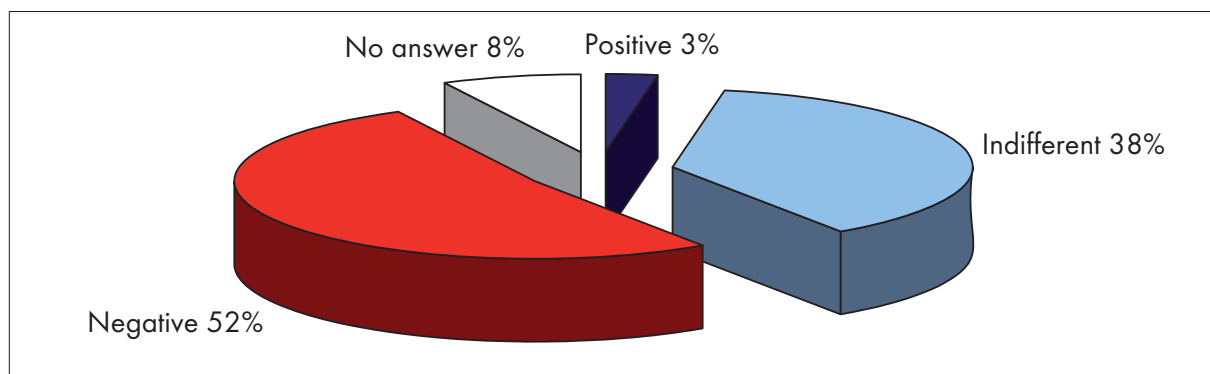
Of course, a unilateral and forced recognition by Russia of the sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be a mistake. But the Georgians should rethink the current situation: Georgia is not a country only of ethnic Georgians. The effort of Georgia’s first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia to operate in disregard of this reality, rather than the “imperialist intrigues of Moscow,” led to the division of Georgia, a situation the country cannot overcome by itself today. Georgia will hardly be able to address this problem in the near future.

Russia is not now seeking to obtain new territory. Russia must show the Georgian elite and international society that the rejection of Russian peacekeepers would inevitably lead to a new round of confrontation, which would threaten the security of the Russian North Caucasus. The events around Tskhinvali in 2004–2005 demonstrated this. Of course, Georgia is a not a threat to Russia. However, the build up of Georgian military strength and its militaristic rhetoric toward South Ossetia and Abkhazia could raise tensions in the Russian border zone. This would represent more than a loss of face for Russia. These high stakes are the main reason behind Russian “ambitions” and increased emotionalism toward what happens in and around Georgia.

**Opinion Poll**

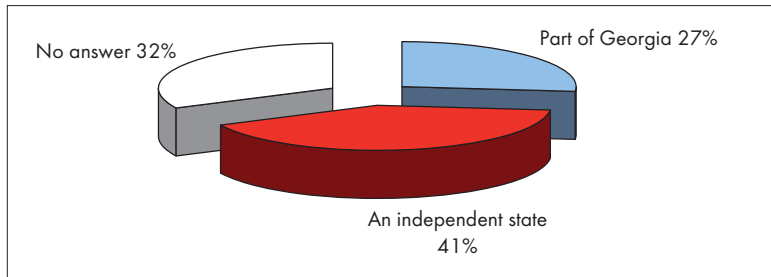
**Russian Attitudes Towards Georgia**

Diagram 1: What is Your Attitude towards the President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili?



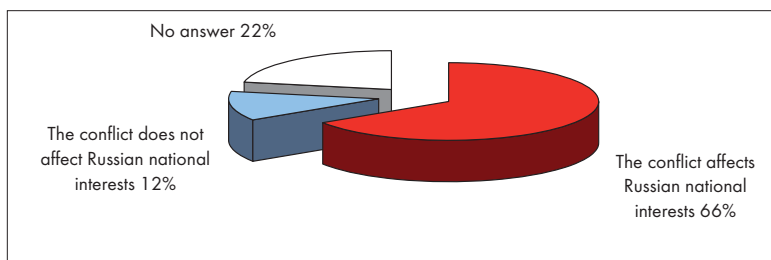
Source: Opinion poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation on 7 and 8 October 2006  
<http://bd.fom.ru/zip/tb0640.zip>

**Diagram 2: Is South Ossetia Part of Georgia or an Independent State? (February 2006)**



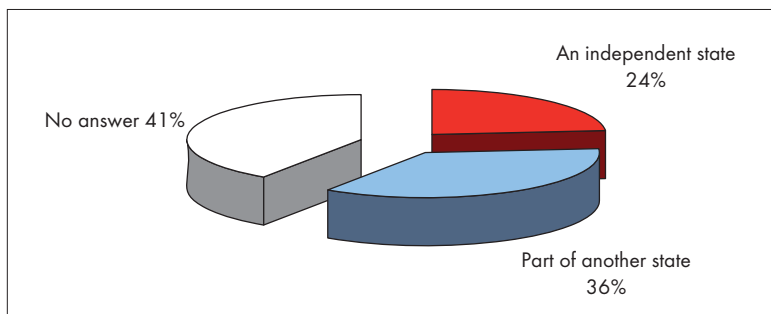
Source: Opinion poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) on 18 and 19 February 2006  
<http://bd.fom.ru/zip/tb0608.zip>

**Diagram 3: Does the Conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia Affect Russian National Interests? (February 2006)**



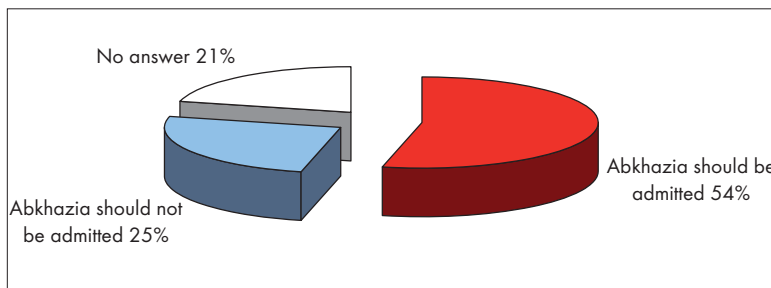
Source: Opinion poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) on 18 and 19 February 2006  
<http://bd.fom.ru/zip/tb0608.zip>

**Diagram 4: Is Abkhazia an Independent State or Part of Another State? (July 2006)**



Source: Opinion poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) on 29 and 30 July 2006  
<http://bd.fom.ru/zip/tb0630.zip>

**Diagram 5: Should the Russian Federation Admit Abkhazia If Abkhazia Wants to Join? (July 2006)**



Source: Opinion poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) on 29 and 30 July 2006  
<http://bd.fom.ru/zip/tb0630.zip>



## A Georgian View

# Have Russian-Georgian Relations Hit Bottom or Will They Continue to Deteriorate?

By Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi

### Summary

Russia and Georgia have opposing views of their conflict. Georgian leaders claim to have sought better relations but believe that Russia is unwilling to compromise with them. The main flashpoint, and a cause of considerable concern in the West, is the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia sought to exert intense pressure on Georgia in 2006, but did not achieve any of its political aims. As a result, the Russian leadership may have given up on its efforts to effect regime change in Georgia. The problem of the separatist regions, however, remains unresolved.

### Two Views of the Same Problem

During the last fifteen years, Georgian-Russian relations have been moving from bad to worse, to a little bit less bad, and then to crisis again. Nobody expects them to improve in the near future. It is only natural to ask: Why are relations so bad? And – most importantly – have these relations hit the bottom already, or can they still get worse?

Both sides have radically different views on what exactly is at issue here. The most frequent complaint I have heard from Russians is that Georgian leaders are prone to blame them for their own disastrous policies, so they are bad-mouthing Russia just to re-channel their people's wrath. (Sometimes they like to add that the Georgian people cherish a secret love for Russia but bad leaders do not allow them to consummate it). During the last three years, after Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, another charge has emerged: Georgians are preparing to renew wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus undermining stability in the Russian south. Of course, Russia must prevent this from happening.

Georgians argue that the Russians are stuck in 19<sup>th</sup>-century-style geopolitical thinking. Russia's outlook is all about the wounded self-esteem of a fallen empire: a failure to control Georgia causes it to experience phantom pains, as if it is missing a limb. There are also ethnic stereotypes at work: Russians see Georgians as hopelessly frivolous and disorderly people who enjoy delectable food and accomplished dancing but cannot be trusted to have a state of their own. They believe that Georgians owe them special gratitude because more than two centuries ago, the Russians were the ones who saved their fellow-Orthodox country from being annihilated by its Muslim neighbors. Therefore, when Georgians claim to be a European country and

say that NATO and eventually EU membership are its due, Russians take this as a personal offense. For two centuries we have fed and protected these hapless Georgians, and look how ungrateful they are: they like Americans better!

Running the risk of being accused of a bias, I would say that I find the Georgian perception closer to truth. This does not imply that my compatriots are without blame. It is handy for any government, especially that of a small and weak country, to have a powerful foreign enemy, and for the last fifteen years Russia has been excellent in this role. While taking the initial steps towards statehood, inexperienced and nationalistic Georgian leaders did quite a few stupid things which led to civil wars and economic breakdown. Naturally, they were happy to explain their incompetence away by blaming Russia for everything that went wrong.

### Georgia Seeks Good Relations

However, it was obvious that having decent relations with Georgia's northern neighbor was crucial – and the Georgian leaders tried hard to achieve this result. The two most recent presidents, Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili, despite their enormous differences, followed a similar trajectory: both sought to find a modus vivendi with Russia, but failed and ended up at loggerheads with the northern neighbor. In late 1993, after Abkhazian separatist forces – with sizeable Russian support – prevailed in the war with the national government, Shevardnadze went out of his way to appease the former metropolis: he signed an agreement on Russian military bases (which was never ratified), legitimated Russia's exclusive control over Abkhazia by inviting Russians to serve as peacekeepers, and allowed Russian border

troops to control its borders with Turkey. It seemed that the Russians considered relegating Georgia to the status of a Russian-satellite state as a return to normality, but did not propose anything in return. As Shevardnadze began to realize this, he gradually drifted to a pro-western orientation and formally announced his bid to join NATO. Relations with Russia reached a nadir in 2001, when Russia accused Georgia of harboring Chechen terrorists in Pankisi Gorge and seriously considered a military invasion. Russia bombed Georgian territory several times then.

That crisis was, in part, explained by personalities: Russian generals simply would not forgive Shevardnadze for his role in giving away the Soviet empire to the West, analysts argued. When the fresh, young Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, he made a new effort to improve relations, proposing a more or less clear deal: we will welcome Russian economic investments, not press for the withdrawal of military bases, and cooperate on the Chechen issue, but you should accept our wish to integrate into the European and Euro-Atlantic community. He also implied that Russia should take a more favorable attitude to Georgia's wish to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There was no distinct answer from the Russians, but for the first six months of Saakashvili's presidency, relations appeared to be on the mend. The summer 2004 crisis in South Ossetia, when the Georgian government tried to solve the issue through a mixture of humanitarian offensive and military intimidation, put an end to this – and relations have steadily worsened ever since.

### Dealing with the Separatist Regions

The events of 2004 lead us to the alleged Georgian project to renew the separatist wars. Following the really unfortunate summer 2004 episode, this is the most serious criticism against Georgia and one that makes many western leaders – including those who generally favor the new Georgian government – think twice about rendering support. Can Saakashvili and his youthful advisers be considered credible and predictable partners?

Immediately after coming to power, Saakashvili's government hoped that it could solve the issue of the separatist conflicts quickly. Such aspirations were mistaken, though the desire to address this issue is fully understandable since the presence of unresolved conflicts is the single most important impediment towards economic development and stable democracy in Georgia. However, while Saakashvili has a habit of making some statements that are hardly diplomatic (like referring to an unfriendly leader as Lili-Putin, for

instance), he has also showed himself to be a rational player who knows how to learn from his mistakes. His clear priority is state-building, which is a natural priority in a country which had frequently been described as a “failing state” in the past. He has achieved serious – arguably, even spectacular – triumphs in this regard: for the first time in modern history, the Georgian state is providing public services, its public servants get salaries they can live on, the armed forces are well-fed and under control, corruption and organized crime are down dramatically, and last year the World Bank officially recognized Georgia as the country that has made the fastest progress towards creating a more attractive business environment. The flow of foreign investments has already increased, though Saakashvili clearly hopes for much more. The October 2006 local elections confirmed a strong popular mandate for the incumbent political party. While NATO membership is far from decided – mainly because of the reluctance of western Europeans who have developed an aversion to anything smacking of “enlargement” – Georgia is now in “intensified dialogue” with the alliance, which makes it a credible candidate for membership: Bringing Georgia to NATO is clearly the highest priority of the government. Saakashvili knows very well that if he stirs up trouble in the separatist regions, he will lose western support and be left one-on-one with an unfriendly Russia. The conventional wisdom in this government is that Russia's goal is to provoke Georgians into doing something stupid in Abkhazia or South Ossetia thus undermining Georgia's NATO ambitions. The recent removal of Irakli Okruashvili, the former minister of defense who had made a foolish pledge of spending New Year's Eve 2007 in Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, was a symbolic gesture to alleviate the remaining western fears.

### Georgia's Answer to Western Critics

Some critics (especially western Europeans) argue: This is all very well, but why does Saakashvili try to annoy Russians without need? Is it so vital to insist on NATO membership – if this is what makes Russians so mad? Why put salt on Russians' wounded pride by demonstratively arresting Russian spies (no one argues they were not spying – but this is not the issue, right?).

The Georgian answer would be: being nice and reasonable would make sense had there been any chance of getting anything in return from Russia. But nobody in Tbilisi believes Saakashvili can do anything to make Putin happy. Every time Georgians ask Russians a straight question: what should we do so that you do not try to destroy us, there is never a clear

answer, just nebulous hints. The story one hears often from Georgian politicians is about Putin's reaction to Saakashvili's question: What will Georgia get in return if it gives up its bid to NATO membership? The problems you already have will not get worse reportedly was the answer. Russia cannot accept Georgia for what it is: confident, independent, wanting to integrate with the West. It wants to change Georgia, not its specific policy.

### Russia Seeks Regime Change

Which in practice means regime change. Russia's steps as well as rhetoric give some credibility to this hypothesis. The Russian political elite appears to believe the theory repeatedly voiced by the Russian media during the last two years: Saakashvili is too emotional, probably mentally unstable, his popularity is dropping, and he is bound to end up like Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's temperamental first president who was in office just over a year before he was removed from power after an armed uprising in January 1992. Some trends in the first half of 2006 seemed to corroborate that theory: there was an increasing tide of public protests against different policies of the government, including some rather brutal behavior of its police. The Russian government apparently financed some political groups (at least that's what almost all believe in Georgia) such as the anti-Soros movement or the Justice Party led by Igor Giorgadze, an ex-KGB officer sought by Interpol and frequently interviewed by Russian TV, that took active part in the protests. On the other hand, Russia believed it could aggravate the situation by causing additional economic grievances – for instance, by blowing up gas pipelines on the coldest days of the winter (in January 2006), or banning Georgian wines and mineral waters from the Russian market. These products were Georgia's most important exports.

In August 2006, when a local warlord started an uprising in Kodori Gorge, the only part of Abkhazia still partially under Georgian control, Russian politicians opined this was the beginning of the end of Saakashvili's regime. The uprising was easily quelled (so, maybe this was really just a local affair), but after this event Saakashvili decided not to take chances and arrested the bulk of the allegedly Russia-backed activists of the Justice Party (they were charged with plotting a coup) and the Russian spies (who the gov-

ernment believed could also help organize some subversive actions).

One may believe this particular conspiracy theory or not. But this is the assumption on which the Georgian government acts. Therefore, the most popular question in Tbilisi is: what else can Russia do to Georgia? Has it exhausted its levers, or does it still have something up its sleeve?

With most economic ties cut and the price of gas raised to western European levels, economic sanctions seem to have reached their limit. Painful as they are, all these measures may be a blessing in disguise. Russians – including Russian politicians – appear to have sincerely believed that even after the Soviet demise Russia had been “feeding Georgia” and could force its southern neighbor down on its knees by cutting the lifeline. If so, in 2006 the lifeline was cut, but Georgia survived: the IMF estimated its GDP growth to have been around 8 percent in 2006. Without Russian sanctions it would probably be closer to 10 percent – unpleasant, but not lethal. If Kremlin strategists hoped that they could help change the regime in Tbilisi – as I suspect they did – they have by now probably given up on this idea.

This outcome allows me to end on a cautiously optimistic note: the best thing about 2006 may have been that Russian-Georgian came very close to hitting the bottom. But there is still one issue that may make things worse: this is a Russian project to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The highest ranking Russian politicians, including President Putin, have hinted that if the international community recognizes Kosovo, Russia might respond by recognizing separatist entities in its “near abroad”. Although the Kosovo solution has been postponed, the Russians still want to move forward: recently the Russian Duma adopted a resolution that recommends that the president recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Putin is still considering the options, but following the Duma recommendation looks like a plausible one. It is hard to say what Russia may gain from such a step, but just the urge to punish insolent Georgia may prove too strong to resist. There may also be a calculation that this time the emotional Georgian president will really be provoked into doing something stupid. I hope not – but this will be a real point of crisis. If this happens, though, it will also be the moment when Russia really exhausts its leverage against Georgia.

#### *About the author*

Ghia Nodia is Chairman of the Board of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy, and Development in Tbilisi and Professor of Political Science at the Ilya Chavchavadze State University.

## Opinion Poll

### Georgian Public Opinion on Foreign Policy Issues

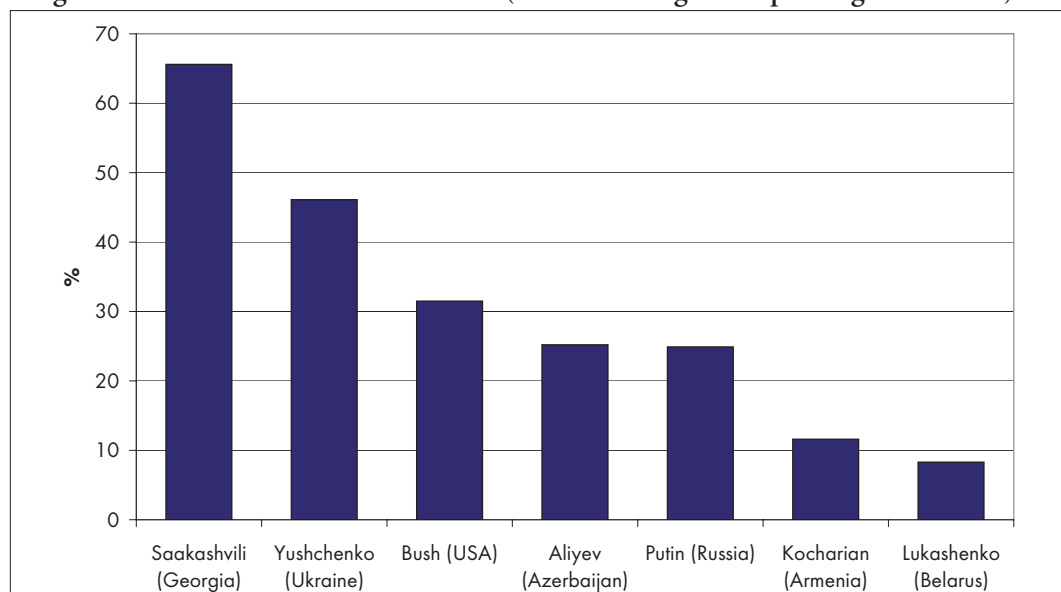
Table 1. How Well Do You Think [Georgian] President Mikheil Saakashvili is Dealing with the Following Issues?

	Very well	Fairly well	Fairly poorly	Very poorly	No answer
Combating corruption	12.9	50.6	21.8	9.9	4.8
Economic reform	3.5	29.7	40.5	18.7	7.5
Foreign policy	11.9	40.3	25.6	13.3	9.0
Domestic policy	3.7	34.9	33.3	20.7	7.3
Combating poverty	1.7	14.1	36.2	43.4	4.6
Combating unemployment	1.3	6.0	35.1	53.1	4.6
Reunify the lost territories	2.4	24.4	32.2	31.6	9.4
Privatization issues	3.3	24.7	26.9	23.8	21.3

Table 2: Confidence in Heads of States

	Great deal of confidence	A fair amount of confidence	Not very much confidence	No confidence at all	Don't know this person	DK/NA
Vladimir Putin – The president of Russia	2.6	22.3	17.1	47.3	2.7	7.9
Aleksander Lukashenko– The president of Belarus	1.1	7.2	14.4	50.3	12.1	15.0
George Bush – The president of the USA	3.5	28.0	17.3	37.0	2.0	12.2
Mikheil Saakashvili – The president of Georgia	20.4	45.2	14.1	15.4	0.4	4.6
Robert Kocharian – The president of Armenia	1.0	10.6	15.4	50.3	8.6	14.1
Ilham Aliyev– The president of Azerbaijan	2.1	23.1	16.2	39.9	4.9	13.7
Viktor Yushchenko – The president of Ukraine	4.3	41.8	13.9	24.9	3.2	12.0

Diagram 1: Confidence in Heads of States (Share of Georgians Expressing Confidence)



Source: Georgian Opinion Research Business International (GORBI), May 2006

## About the Russian Analytical Digest

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen ([www.forschungsstelle-osteuropa.de](http://www.forschungsstelle-osteuropa.de)) and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich). It is supported by the Otto Wolff Foundation and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russlandanalysen* ([www.russlandanalysen.de](http://www.russlandanalysen.de)), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia ([www.res.ethz.ch](http://www.res.ethz.ch)), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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### Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen

Founded in 1982 and led by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Eichwede, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to socialist and post-socialist cultural and societal developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Research Centre possesses a unique collection of alternative culture and independent writings from the former socialist countries in its archive. In addition to extensive individual research on dissidence and society in socialist societies, since January 2007, a group of international research institutes is working on a collaborative project on the theme "The other Eastern Europe – the 1960s to the 1980s, dissidence in politics and society, alternatives in culture. Contributions to comparative contemporary history" which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

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The CSS is engaged in research projects with a number of Swiss and international partners. The Center's research focus is on new risks, European and transatlantic security, strategy and doctrine, state failure and state building, and Swiss foreign and security policy.

In its teaching capacity, the CSS contributes to the ETH Zurich-based Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree course for prospective professional military officers in the Swiss army and the ETH and University of Zurich-based MA program in Comparative and International Studies (MACIS), offers and develops specialized courses and study programs to all ETH Zurich and University of Zurich students, and has the lead in the Executive Masters degree program in Security Policy and Crisis Management (MAS ETH SPCM), which is offered by ETH Zurich. The program is tailored to the needs of experienced senior executives and managers from the private and public sectors, the policy community, and the armed forces.

The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Comprehensive Risk Analysis and Management Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

Any opinions expressed in Russian Analytical Digest are exclusively those of the authors.

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