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RUSSIAN–GEORGIAN RELATIONS

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Interpreting the Tension in Georgian–Russian Relations

By Tornike Sharashenidze, Tbilisi

Abstract

Russia's current leadership has many reasons to view Georgia as a threat, but the most important is that Georgia's partial success in reform and democratization serves as an alternative to the Russian model in the post-Soviet space. The Georgian leaders, for their part, benefit from presenting Russia as an enemy, but ultimately Georgians would like to see its powerful neighbor as a friendly, peaceful democracy.

A Variety of Motives

Russo–Georgian relations surpass all other bilateral relations in the post-Soviet space in terms of their tension and bitterness. Georgia is the only post-Soviet country which is not recognized by Russia within its legal boundaries and it is the only country that fought a war with Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tensions will hardly disappear since no Georgian government can reconcile the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and every Russian government will find it extremely difficult to reverse the fateful decision of recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. However the problem of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is only the top of the iceberg; it is more a consequence than the cause of strained bilateral relations. The roots are much deeper; they require an examination of history and force us to assess the post-Soviet heritage from different perspectives.

Georgia became a part of the Russian empire in the end of the 18th century. According to Russian and Soviet sources, the Georgians themselves asked for help. According to Georgian historians, the Russian empire instigated domestic disorder in Georgia and left the Georgian king no other choice but to ask Russia to establish a protectorate, however the Georgians did not want to be annexed. Differences in interpreting history are hardly relevant for our analysis (although they serve as one more explanation for Russo–Georgian enmity) and it is much more important to understand Russian motives for annexing Georgia. Expanding its territories was supposed to be business as usual for the Russian empire, but Georgia was a special case. This small country enjoyed a strategic location since it controlled the entrance to the entire South Caucasus. In the late 18th century, Russia launched successful wars against Turkey, which controlled territory the Russians coveted—the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits. Georgia served as a convenient bridge-head for attacking the Ottoman empire. After it annexed Georgia, Russia attacked Turkey from both the Balkans and the Caucasus. Additionally, with its access to Georgian territory, the Russian empire expanded in the Caucasus and later in Central Asia. Georgia was the beginning, a necessary gateway for further expansion.

Of course, it is absolutely irrelevant to explain cur-

rent Russian motives by plans to capture the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits. Besides, Russia enjoys strong military positions in Armenia and it has only begun to deploy its bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which means that it hardly needs Georgia to maintain its influence in the region. Explaining Russian motives by its ambitions to serve as a sole transit route for Caspian energy resources could be more reasonable. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzerum pipelines became the first routes that made it possible to transport Caspian oil and natural gas without crossing Russian territory. But, at the same time, the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline hardly affected the status quo on the world oil market. The Baku–Tbilisi–Erzerum gas pipeline only impacts the immediate region and most likely it is destined to remain this way since the Nabucco project, which would carry Caspian gas to Europe, has stalled. Thus, Georgia poses little threat to Russia as an alternative energy corridor.

Georgia's aspirations to join NATO could serve as a more convincing explanation for Russian enmity toward its neighbor. Indeed, Moscow perceives NATO enlargement as a threat and it does not want NATO on its southern borders, right next to the North Caucasus, the most vulnerable part of the Russian Federation. But reasonable Russian policymakers should understand that the West is hardly interested in stirring up conflict in the North Caucasus and dismembering Russia. The Baltic states have been in NATO for almost a decade and their membership did not endanger Russia in any way.

Despite having found reasons to undermine all these motives, we should not discount their possible influence on Russian policy towards Georgia. On one hand, Russia may not be threatened by a Georgian energy corridor, but, on the other hand, it naturally is unhappy about the precedent of transporting Caspian energy resources bypassing Russia. Reasonable policymakers should not view NATO enlargement as a threat, but how powerful are such policymakers within the current Russian elite, which is led by a former KGB officer trained to fight Western interests worldwide?

Russia Sees Georgia's Alternative Path as a Threat

All these reasons (once again, with the exclusion of plans to take control of the Straits) are still more or less irrelevant. But there is another cause that has driven Russian behavior towards Georgia in recent years and that reached its apogee in August 2008: Russia views Georgia as a threat because it has offered an alternative development path for the post-Soviet zone.

This does not necessarily mean that a democratic Georgia is a threat to authoritarian Russia. In fact Georgia still has a long way to go to develop into a true European democracy. Georgia definitely enjoys freedom of speech, but the executive branch of government is too strong vis-a-vis the legislature and judiciary. The Georgian government that came to power after the Rose Revolution has mostly focused on modernization rather than democratization and it turned out to be a valid choice if we compare contemporary Georgia and Ukraine. After the Orange Revolution, the latter hardly undertook any reforms, but boasted of a higher level of democracy. However democracy without strong state institutions bred the current Ukrainian regime that pulls the country back to authoritarianism. As a result, the Ukrainian political model now differs little from Russia's—an outcome that cannot fail to make the Kremlin happy. Ukraine has fallen back as well Russia in terms of democratic development. Ukraine belongs to the category of Hybrid Regimes according to the latest report of the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index,¹ while earlier it belonged to the category of Flawed Democracies. Russia has fallen from Hybrid Regimes to Authoritarian Regimes. As for Georgia, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, it is still behind Ukraine (though well ahead of Russia), but in recent years it has shown modest but irreversible progress. That means that although Georgia cannot overwhelm the post-Soviet zone with its democratic standards, the trend of its development does not lead it toward the current Russian model. Slowly, but irreversibly, it leads Georgia to the West.

Moreover, the reforms undertaken by the current Georgian government look truly impressive. The almost total absence of low-level corruption and the provision of public services that can be considered effective by any standard—these are achievements that the Georgian people could not even dream about a decade ago and which still remain distant dreams for other post-Soviet republics (more or less excluding the Baltic states). The post-Soviet era has been dominated by corruption,

oligarchs, authoritarian rule and, even more importantly, a pessimistic view of the future—a belief that everything would remain the same and that nothing could make things change for the better. Russia's official propaganda also had an impact by portraying Western democracy as a “phony” system that did not really offer people freedoms. But the Georgian case demonstrated that at least corruption can be beaten and post-Soviet countries can change things for the better if they really try. Thus Georgia set a precedent that can be even more dangerous for the current Russian political elite than the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline. Corrupt and backward regimes hardly can impose their will over advanced societies. Consequently, the current Russian regime can expand its influence only over corrupt and backward regimes. If Georgia's successes continue, then Russia will lose its chance to subordinate this country under its political control. If the Georgian reforms set an example for other post-Soviet countries, then Russia's positions will be seriously shaken. This is why Moscow was so frightened by the wave of Orange Revolutions in the post-Soviet zone. As the Ukrainian revolution stalled (with some help from the Kremlin) and the Kyrgyz revolution turned into unfortunate civil disorder, Georgia still remains a successful case.

Georgia's Motives

Having discussed Russian motives, we now turn to an exploration of Georgian motives. It is obvious that the current Georgian authorities masterfully manipulate the image of Russia as an external enemy and thus distract Georgian society from domestic problems, such as unemployment and poverty. The Georgian authorities no doubt use (and sometimes abuse) the Russian card with their Western partners too by referring to the “Russian threat.” Despite living under a genuine threat (the Russian military bases are located some 40 kilometers from Tbilisi), it may be convenient for Georgia's leaders to have such an enemy.

But, at the same time, the current Georgian elite genuinely believes that the Georgian people have to be isolated from Russia for some time in order to form a new, European Georgia. During the Soviet era, Georgians enjoyed much greater prosperity and considerably more liberties than any other Soviet nation. This happened partly because the Soviet elite decided to turn Georgia into a resort area and partly because Georgians successfully adjusted to the corrupt Soviet system. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia suddenly became one of the poorest post-Soviet countries. Unlike Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, Georgia had no natural resources and Georgians could no longer steal money from the Soviet budget. Consequently, Georgians had to become truly

1 http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy_Index_Final_Dec_2011.pdf&mode=wp

competitive and this task will not be accomplished if Georgia remains exposed to the “corrupt Russian system.” Joining Europe can be achieved only through modernization. No doubt many Russians regard these ambitions with some irony since their views of Georgians are still based on Soviet stereotypes—Georgians are nice and talented people, but they are not equipped to run an independent state (in fact they lost their statehood some two centuries ago). This is why Russia’s Foreign Minister Lavrov once referred to Georgia’s President Saakashvili as “pathological” and “an anomaly” among the Georgian people.² Lavrov thus openly expressed how the current Russian elite feels about Georgians—they are good people, but they should not have ambitions to run an independent and successful state, since Saakashvili has such an ambition, he is an anomaly.

The Russian authorities sometimes make official Tbilisi’s job of presenting Russia as hostile easier. When the Georgian government unilaterally introduced a visa-free regime with Russia, the latter failed to reciprocate. Against the background of the official Russian rhetoric, which asserted that the Kremlin loved “the brotherly Georgian nation but did not like its government,” Russia’s decision to continue requiring visas hurt its image.

It made clear that the current Russian elite does not prefer carrots over sticks and that it cares little about the “brotherly Georgian nation” in practice. No doubt Saakashvili and his aides were happy with the Russian response since Moscow met their expectations as an external enemy. At the same time, Russian tourists visit Georgia in increasing numbers and they discover that Georgia is not only modernized, but also surprisingly friendly. Russia is a huge country and a few thousand tourists cannot influence the hostile attitude towards Georgia, but with time the situation may change and the current Russian regime may find it more difficult to justify its current policy towards Georgia. This is what reasonable Georgians hope to see one day—that Russia will become friendly, peaceful and democratic too. One cannot change geography and it is better to have a good neighbor than to try to resist this neighbor forever, especially when the latter is both big and powerful. Russia is notorious for being unpredictable and it could turn out to be unpredictable in a positive way too. Georgia may be a country that has suffered a lot due to its problems with Russia, but Georgians are also truly interested in the democratization of Russia.

About the Author

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2 <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23831>

Russia and Georgia: Going Their Separate Ways

By Fyodor Lukyanov, Moscow

Abstract

For Russia, the 2008 five-day war was not about Georgia, but relations with the West. The war marked a turning point for Russia in which it has begun to build an identity based on the future rather than rooted in the past. Now that Russia has been admitted to the World Trade Organization, there is little in concrete terms that it wants from Georgia, whose leader is following the typical post-Soviet path into authoritarianism, although with a state that is more effective than Russia’s.

The Georgian War in the East–West Context

Russia marked the four-year anniversary of the Russian–Georgian war in August 2012 with a surprising controversy sparked by a movie of unclear origin posted on YouTube. In the online footage, former generals accused then-president Dmitri Medvedev of being slow and inde-

cisive on August 6 and 7, 2008, when Georgia launched an attack to conquer South Ossetia in a bid to restore its territorial integrity. The Five Day War is no longer an issue in Russian political debate, making it particularly strange that this topic emerged. Commentators explained the appearance of this anonymous video as

a sign of internecine fighting within the ruling class, whose factions are poised in a state of fragile and unstable balance.

Otherwise, neither this war, nor relations with Georgia are part of the current political debate in Russia. Russia's leaders were surprised in 2008 that the military rout did not lead to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's political collapse. Initially his survival provoked disappointment and anger, but then attention waned.

Approximately two years after the war and against the background of Russia's discussion about modernizing its own political and economic systems, interest in the Georgian reform experience began to rise, and even some of Saakashvili's staunchest critics acknowledged that the Georgian model has not been as unsuccessful as Russian propaganda tried to portray it. But the Georgian reforms already have reached their peak, and the political leadership seems to be focused on keeping power with an eye toward important parliamentary elections scheduled for this fall and the presidential elections set for next spring. President Saakashvili most likely will repeat the trick used by Vladimir Putin to stay in power, although with some enhancements. Not only will Saakashvili move from the presidency to the prime minister's office, but he will also re-distribute power in favor of the parliament. In this light, Russian commentators have been laughing about U.S. descriptions of Georgia as a beacon of democracy.

When passions calmed down after the first war Russia fought against one of the post-Soviet states, it has become apparent that there was no real agenda between Russia and Georgia. It is increasingly clear that for Russia the Georgian war was a global, rather than a regional exercise, and Georgia *per se* has not been a political target.

Whatever formal reason has been offered, the broader background was obvious to everyone. As Medvedev put it bluntly last fall, "For some of our partners, including NATO, it was a signal that they must think about geopolitical stability before making a decision to expand the alliance." The real cause of the five-day war was tensions that had been accumulating in the broader region for several years. In the mid-2000s, the US administration decided to expand NATO into the post-Soviet space. Ukraine and Georgia hoped to join, but were eventually denied membership due to resistance from some EU countries—primarily Germany and France.

Washington and several European capitals disregarded Moscow's warning that expansion would be interpreted as crossing the line. They argued that Russia has always been against the alliance's growth, but ultimately accepts the inevitable. Moscow failed to convince its partners that there is a major difference between Poland—or even Estonia—and Ukraine.

Ultimately, tensions came to a head and Saakashvili recklessly gave Moscow an excellent pretext to draw a bold line.

A Turning Point

The war was a major turning point for all sides involved. For Russia, it was something approaching psychological revenge after a 20-year geopolitical retreat, proof that Moscow can say no. Russia showed the United States and its allies that it can be resolute and serious. The signal was received. Objectively speaking, the Russian army did not demonstrate outstanding military capability during the war, but what little it had to show proved enough to reaffirm and even strengthen its standing. Advocating NATO's eastward expansion has become practically taboo.

The 2008 war marked the end of the post-Soviet era in Russia's foreign policy, during which Moscow was focused on restoring its status and proving that it remained a great power. After August 2008, it began working on a new approach in which the collapse of the former superpower is not the point of departure. This is a very difficult process because it requires building a new identity projected into the future and not inspired by the past. The undertaking affects all aspects of the Russian polity, but in terms of foreign policy it means awareness of the country's capabilities and limitations, a focus on more practical goals, and the concrete balance of interests. The Eurasian Union, for example, is, contrary to many views, not the realization of imperial ambitions or an attempt to restore the Soviet Union, but a calculated economic project inspired more by the European integration model than older Russian or Soviet aspirations. The ultimate goal is not to re-unify all former Soviet states, but to attract some of them who are commercially interesting. So, Georgia unintentionally contributed to this transformation of Russia, but did not benefit much herself.

Russian–Georgian Relations

Russian–Georgian relations had always been bumpy and almost ground to a halt after the five-day war. True, there have been some signs of improvement: the two countries have restored regular flights and are discussing reopening the Russian market to Georgian goods. Most importantly, they struck a compromise that allowed Russia to join the WTO. Just six months ago, Tbilisi's objections to Moscow's entry were considered insurmountable because they were linked to a sacred issue for both sides, the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

However, these signs of improvement do not change the overall situation: Russia and Georgia remain at odds over Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Osse-

tia as independent states and that will not change in the foreseeable future. Numerous attempts at mediation by various European institutions have failed. To put aside propaganda, territorial settlement is a non-issue in real terms. From the point of view of practical security and safety, the situation now, with Russian troops stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, is much better than before the war. Prestige aside, the military defeat relieved Georgia of a burden and deprived Russia of a major lever; everything is clear and neither side can play on the previous ambiguity of the situation.

There is one potentially dangerous issue between Russia and Georgia, connected to Georgia's desire for revenge. In May 2011 the Georgian parliament voted to recognize the 1864 genocide against the Circassian people in the Russian Empire. Givi Targamadze, head of the parliamentary committee on security and defense, similarly proposed discussing acts of genocide against other North Caucasus peoples. The political calculus behind Georgia's actions is obvious. But the risks are significant.

The issue of genocide was a popular political tool in the period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, until recently, it was the responsibility of the ethnic group claiming to be the victim of genocide to win international recognition of the crime. This was the case with the Armenians, Ukrainians (Holodomor), Poles (the Katyn massacre), Ossetians (after the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali), and the Georgian claim regarding Abkhazia.

But the Circassian genocide is different because the claim has been taken up by a third party, Georgia, after being widely discussed by the Circassian diaspora. The Russian government has long brushed the problem aside, apparently failing to appreciate its significance. The North Caucasus is the most volatile region in Russia and Moscow's biggest headache. The Georgian government was certainly aware of that when it aimed its latest blow. Any mention of genocide generates a huge international reaction and guarantees considerable attention given the nature of today's information environment and how widespread the humanitarian ideology is. The proximity of the region in question to the site of the next Winter Olympics gives the claim even more publicity. Tibet employed a similar tactic shortly before the Beijing Olympics.

Surprisingly, Georgia does not seem to expect this move to boomerang. Although destabilization of the North Caucasus might give Georgian politicians some satisfaction, the country itself is not immune to what happens on its borders. The Chechen war was a massive inconvenience to Georgia, which had no means of controlling the militants infiltrating the country. Any other conflict in the region will have the same effect;

worse still, the consequences will be even less predictable because the international situation has grown more complex since then.

Moscow is unlikely to stand idly by as Georgia destabilizes the region. Some in Georgia believe Russia cannot hurt Georgia anymore after having stripped it of one-third of its territory. But that is not true. Georgia is not an ethnically homogenous country. There are Armenian and Azeri enclaves that can retaliate. Even though Russia does not control these populations, any complex and unstable society is prone to external influence. In Georgia, interethnic relations are stable but not ideal. There is no need to mention that the Russian side will closely follow Georgian moves and reciprocate if Moscow feels a real threat to stability in the Northern Caucasus or the Sochi Olympics.

The picture became somewhat more complicated in September 2012, when a group of fighters, mainly of North Caucasus origin, tried to infiltrate Russian territory (Dagestan) from Georgia. Georgian soldiers confronted the fighters and killed them. For the first time since the 2008 war, the Georgian security service, through Switzerland, gave its Russian counterparts detailed information about the dead guerillas, a sign that Tbilisi is concerned about developments in the Russian part of the Caucasus and is not interested in fueling instability there.

Since the only practical issue with Georgia—the WTO accession—has been settled, there is not much else that Russia wants from Tbilisi in concrete terms. The ideological challenge is there, but it seems to decrease as well. Under Saakashvili, Georgia sought to create a conceptual alternative to Russia by providing an example of a complete and irreversible break of historical and cultural ties with its powerful neighbor. The essence of his experiment is to forcibly re-educate the Georgian people. The president has a very low opinion of his compatriots, whom he wants to teach to live and work properly. Saakashvili and his very young team employ methods reminiscent of the Bolsheviks, albeit toward liberal goals. His strident Russophobia is more a means than an end. A decisive break with Russia and the nations' shared cultural traditions seems to be the best means of rebuilding the Georgian nation.

Saakashvili has accomplished one indisputable achievement—he has built an effective state machine. Suffice it to mention Georgia's polite and well-groomed police and border guards, the absence of low-level corruption (in a country where it used to be regarded as endemic), flawless government services (whereas lazy indifference had been considered part of the national character) and better tax collection. No other post-Soviet state has come anywhere close. Saakashvili has built an

authoritarian state where the main agency is the Interior Ministry, which keeps the Georgian people under close supervision. This result has its pros and cons. On the one hand, the government machine is working smoothly, but it can always be used to crack down on any opposition. In a way, this kind of efficient authoritarianism is more irritating for Russia than a democratic Georgia might be, because it proves that even the authoritarian regime in Russia is less able.

But this administrative model cannot ensure Georgia's further development. Moreover, continued attempts using crude means to destroy Georgia's national mentality and tradition will engender resistance. It is necessary to rethink the reforms with due account of the country's unique "human raw material" rather than attempting to remake it. However, this is not what the authorities are going to do. They hope to dominate the decisive parliamentary election in the fall because next year Georgia

will turn from a presidential republic into a parliamentary one, and Saakashvili intends to become prime minister. He has descended into a strategy of retaining power by any means, which has never produced the desired effect. The government's Bolshevik approach is polarizing society and fostering discontent. The political aspirations of Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's wealthiest man, helped the opposition to consolidate its strength.

Saakashvili is sincerely confident in his mission. He believes he cannot and should not leave power until he realizes his vision for Georgia. In practical terms, this means he will increase pressure on the opposition, which he considers a "force for chaos," and try to hold onto power, whatever the cost. This is a dangerous approach that does not guarantee success. Moreover, it is a painfully familiar post-Soviet road—one that the Georgian reformer detested and tried so hard to avoid.

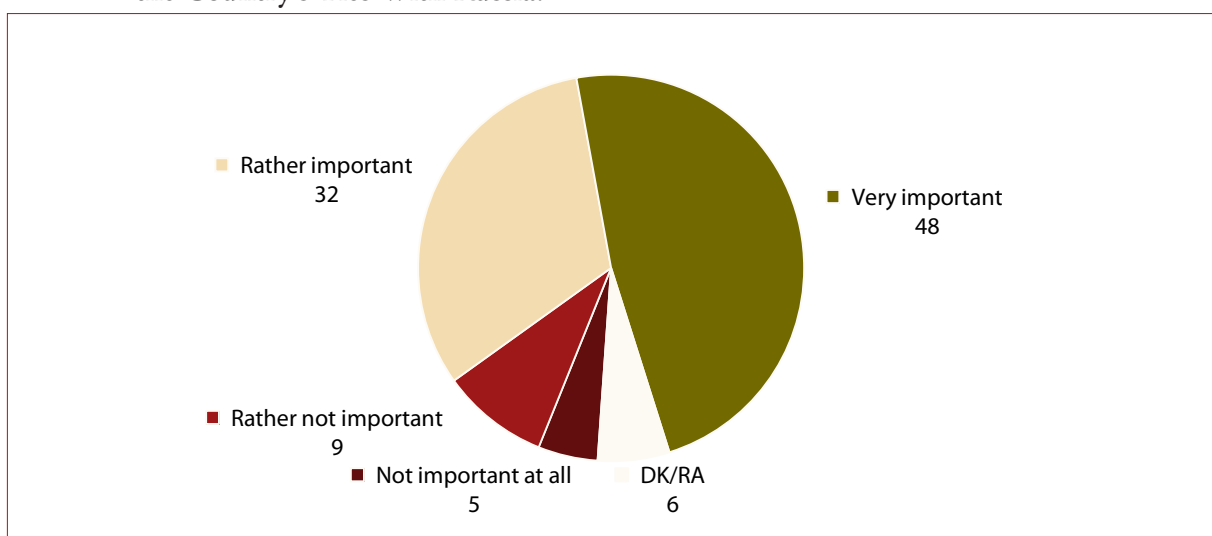
About the Author

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OPINION POLL

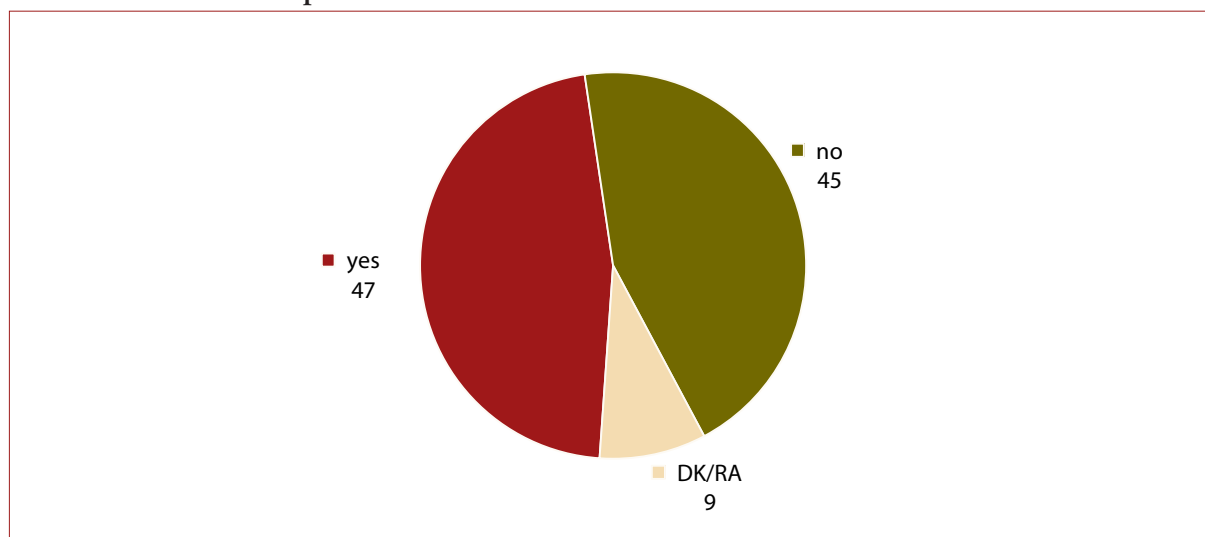
Georgian Public Opinion on Relations With Russia

Figure 1: In Your Opinion How Important Is It For the Georgian Government to Strengthen the Country's Ties With Russia?



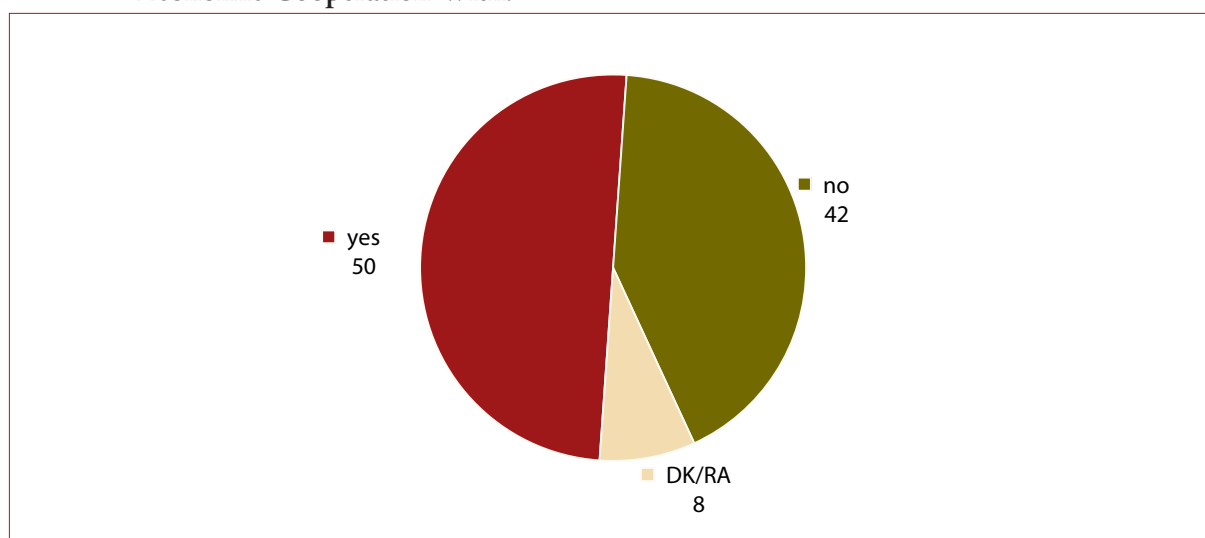
Source: CRRC EU Survey 2011

Figure 2: Does Russia Belong to the Three Top Countries Georgia Should Have the Closest Political Cooperation With?

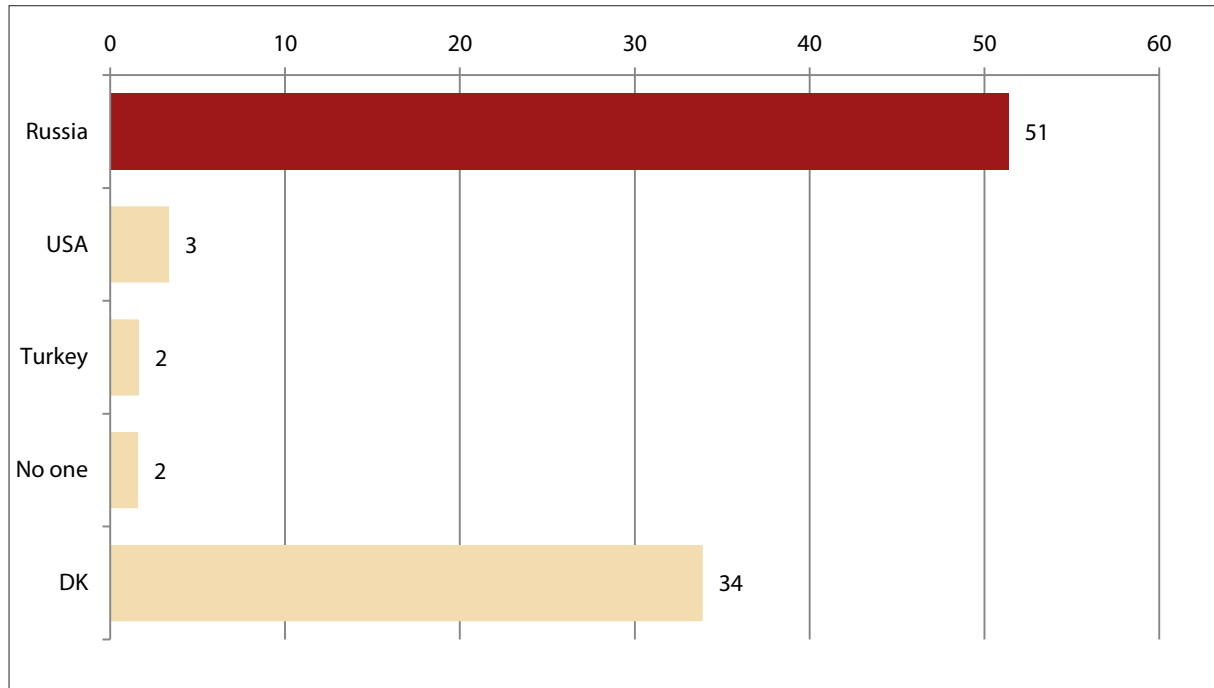


Source: CRRC EU Survey 2011

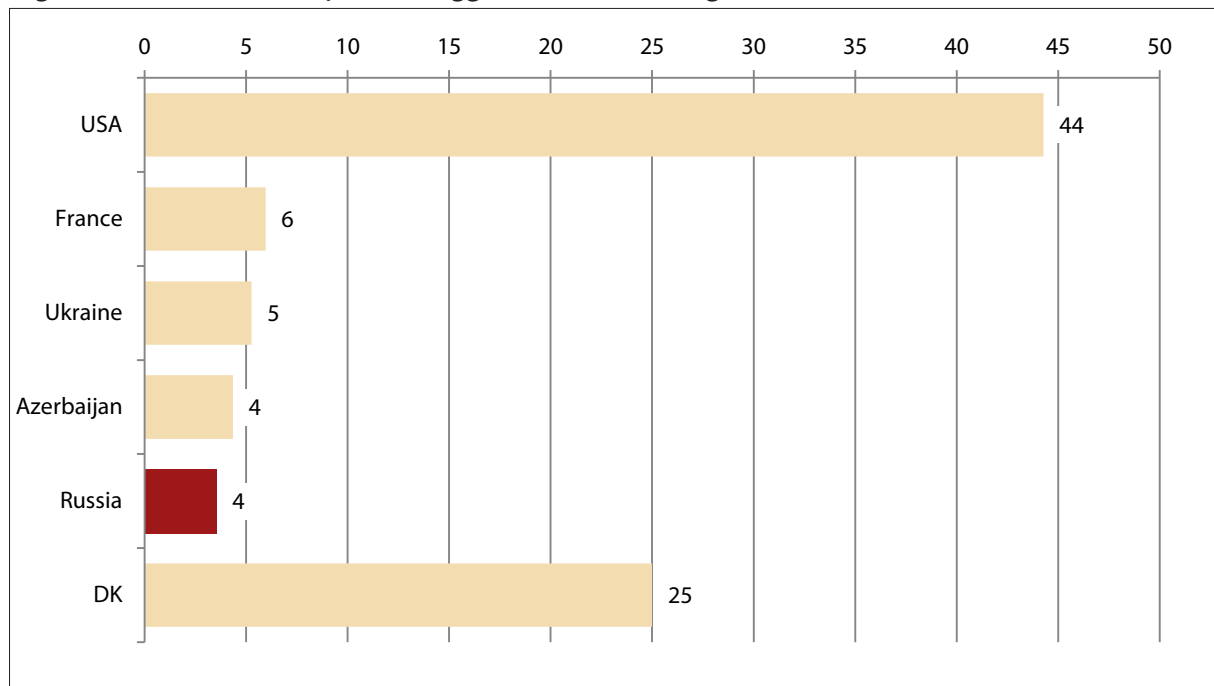
Figure 3: Does Russia Belong to the Three Top Countries Georgia Should Have the Closest Economic Cooperation With?



Source: CRRC EU Survey 2011

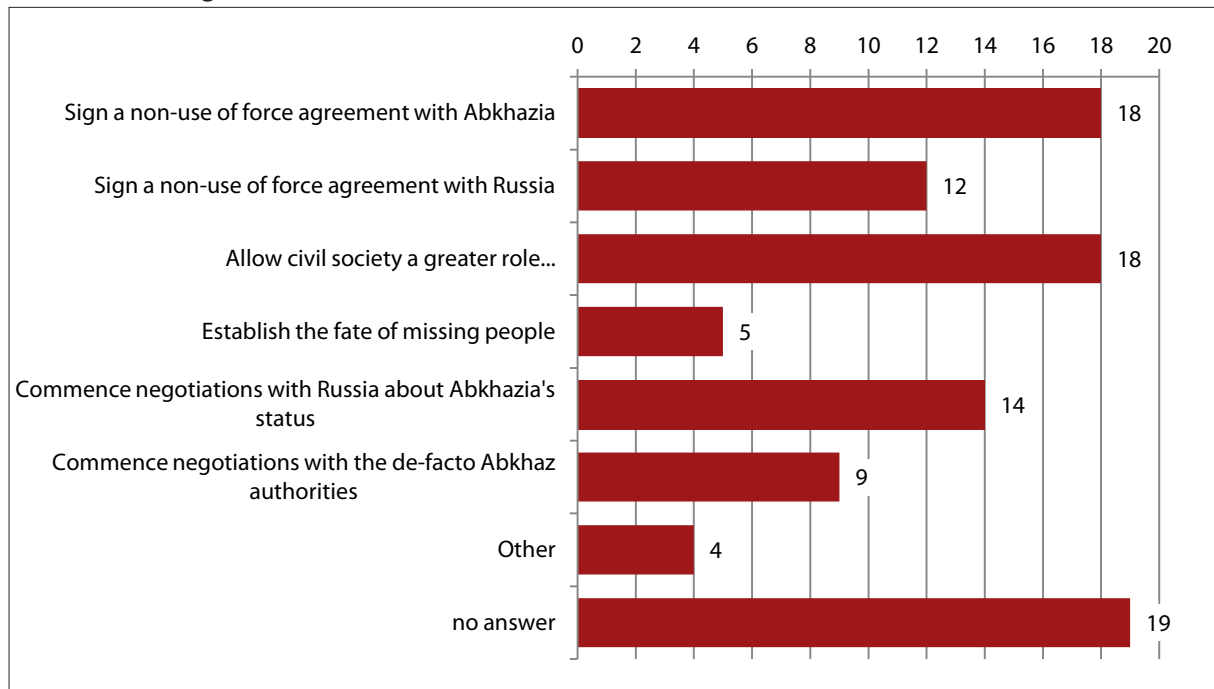
Figure 4: Which Country Is the Biggest Enemy of Georgia?

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2011

Figure 5: Which Country Is the Biggest Friend of Georgia?

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2011

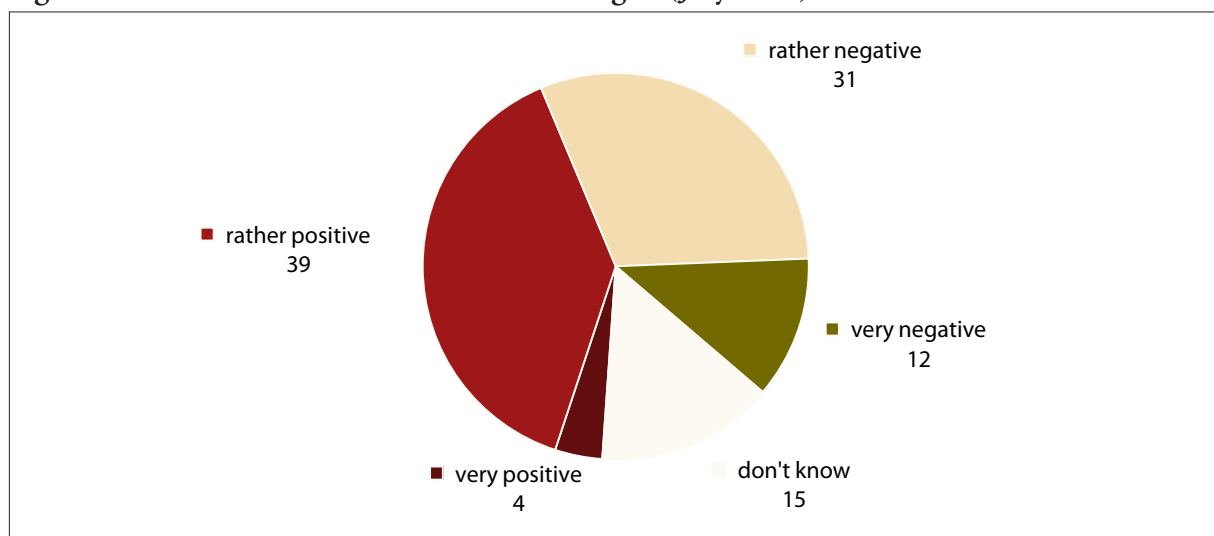
Figure 6: Which of the following activities do you think is the most important for the Georgian government to perform in the next two years in order to find a solution to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict?



Source: Caucasus Barometer 2010

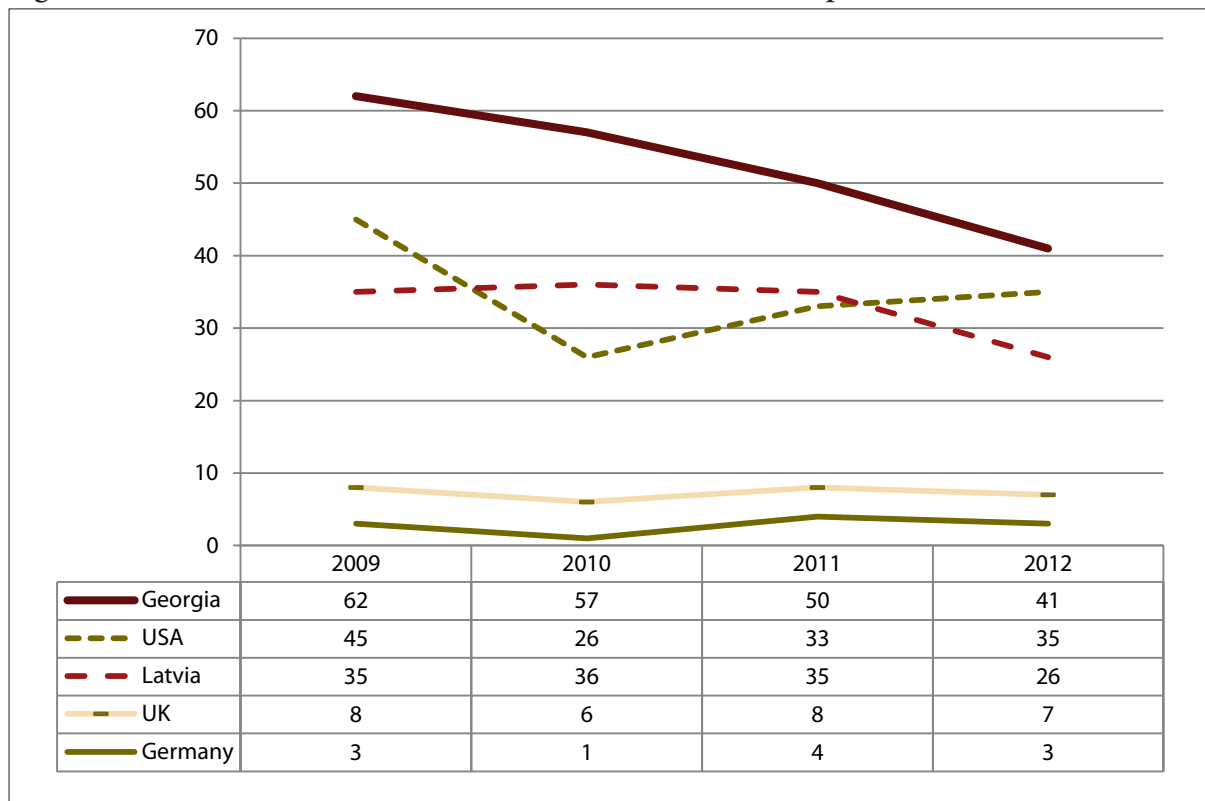
Russian Public Opinion on Relations With Georgia

Figure 1: What Is Your Attitude Towards Georgia? (July 2012)



Source: Independent Russian polling institute Levada Centre,
<http://www.levada.ru/08-08-2012/rossiyane-o-nezavisimosti-abkhazii-i-yuosetii>

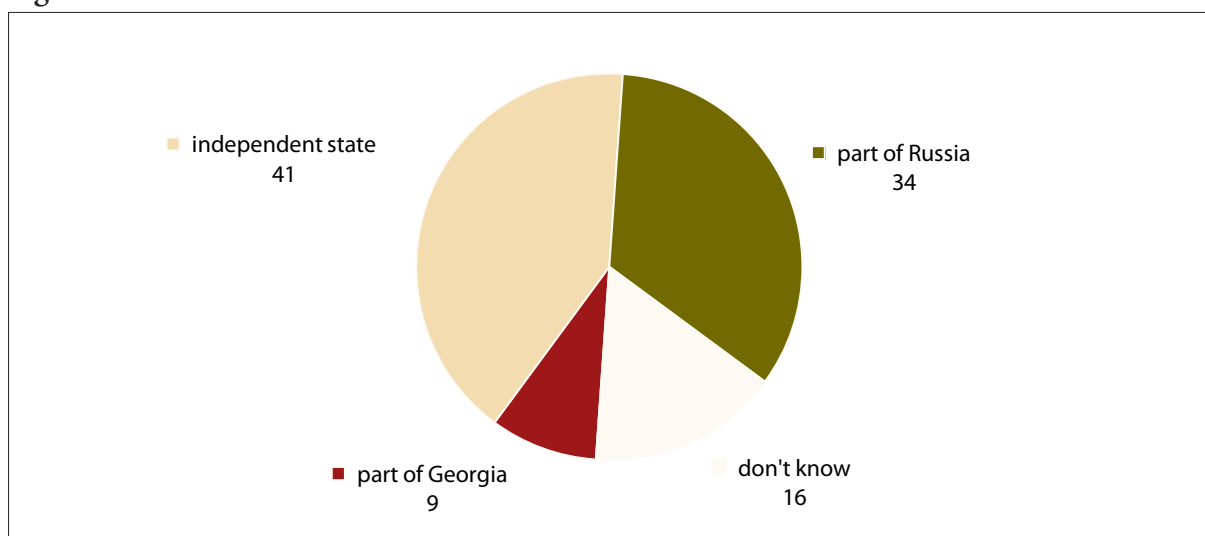
Figure 2: Which Countries Are the Worst Enemies of Russia? (up to 5)



Note: Only selected countries. Polls were conducted in May of each year, in 2009 in March.

Source: Independent Russian polling institute Levada Centre, <http://www.levada.ru/14-06-2012/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam>

Figure 3: What Should the Status of Abkhazia Be?



Source: Independent Russian polling institute Levada Centre, <http://www.levada.ru/08-08-2012/rossiyane-o-nezavisimosti-abkhazii-i-yuosetii>

CHRONICLE

From 29 June to 7 September 2012

29 June 2012	The Georgian Parliament adopts “Georgia’s State Strategy on Relations with the Peoples of the North Caucasus” that outlines priority areas to boost ties between Tbilisi and the North Caucasus including trade, healthcare, education and human rights
30 June 2012	Long-time Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili is appointed as Georgia’s prime minister replacing Nika Gilauri
4 July 2012	President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy meets with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in Tbilisi as part of an official trip to the three South Caucasus countries and declares that the more Georgia reforms, the more the EU can help it
9 July 2012	Moldovan Prime Minister Vlad Filat visits Georgia and meets with new Georgian Prime Minister Vano Merabishvili to discuss bilateral issues, including the possible launch of direct air flights between Tbilisi and Chisinau
10 July 2012	New Georgian Defence Minister Dimitri Shashkin says in an interview with a Georgian newspaper that the country’s defence policy will be built around “three Ts”: total care, total training and total defence
11 July 2012	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili expresses hope at a conference in Batumi that the EU will give Georgia a membership perspective during the next EU Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius
16 July 2012	Georgian Prime Minister Vano Merabishvili meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during an official visit in Baku
18 July 2012	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili meets with Turkish Defence Minister İsmet Yılmaz in Batumi and talks about Turkey’s support for Georgia’s NATO integration
19 July 2012	Incumbent Bako Sahakian wins the presidential elections held in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh with 66.7 percent of the votes
19 July 2012	The Georgian Foreign Ministry reaffirms Georgia’s support for Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and states that it does not recognize the presidential elections in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh
3 August 2012	Retired army general and former presidential candidate in the 19 July elections in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, Vitaly Balasanyan, launches a new opposition group
5 August 2012	Iran suspends visa-free travel rules for Georgian citizens for 26 days citing security reasons
8 August 2008	Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev visits the breakaway region of South Ossetia on the fourth anniversary of the Georgian–Russian war
8 August 2012	Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan says during talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow that the two countries have reached an understanding about the price of Russian natural gas to Armenia
14 August 2012	The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry rejects as a provocation claims in the Azerbaijani press that Ukraine sold rocket launchers and mobile missile systems to Armenia in 2011
17 August 2012	The Azerbaijani prosecutor-general’s office says that it has launched a probe into the alleged poisoning of late Azerbaijani President Abulfaz Elchibey who led the country in 1992–93
19 August 2012	Leader of the Georgian Dream opposition coalition Bidzina Ivanishvili meets with ex-parliamentary speaker and opposition leader Nino Burdjanadze
21 August 2012	Co-rapporteurs from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) express concerns over the seizure of bank accounts belonging to political parties within the Georgian Dream opposition coalition in Georgia as well as the “disproportionate fines” levied by the State Audit Agency against opposition members
22 August 2012	The OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) announces the launch of an election observation mission for the 1 October parliamentary elections in Georgia
23 August 2012	Israel recognizes Georgia’s neutral travel documents for the citizens of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia

24 August 2012	Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Seyyid Abbas Eraqchi pays an official visit to Baku for talks about Iranian–Azerbaijani bilateral ties which could include the question of the detention of two Azerbaijani poets on charges of espionage in Iran
24 August 2012	The Turkish company TAV Airports Holding says that it would invest 65 million US dollars in the reconstruction of a third runway at Tbilisi airport in exchange for the extension of its airport's operation until late 2037
28 August 2012	22 Azerbaijanis are on trial in Azerbaijan for allegedly planning attacks on the US and Israeli embassies in Baku in connection with Iran's Revolutionary Guards
29 August 2012	The Georgian Interior Ministry says that three security officers were killed during a battle with militants who had seized hostages in the Lopata Gorge area after entering Georgian territory from Russia
29 August 2012	The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) says that reports from Georgia about the infiltration of a group of armed militants from the Russian Republic of Dagestan into Georgian territory are provocative and groundless
31 August 2012	The Azerbaijani President's quick pardon of the repatriated Azerbaijani killer of an Armenian army officer sparks a diplomatic row between Armenia and Hungary, where Lieutenant Ramil Safarov had been sentenced to life in prison before being returned to his country of origin. Azerbaijan had promised that he would serve the remainder of his term, but instead set him free.
3 September 2012	EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Štefan Füle say in a joint statement that the EU–Georgia dialogue on the Association Agreement that includes the deep and comprehensive free trade agreement and visa liberalization is “characterized by good progress”
3 September 2012	Russia's Foreign Ministry criticizes Azerbaijan and Hungary for the release of an Azerbaijani officer sentenced to life for killing an Armenian officer
5 September 2012	The Foreign Ministers of Poland and Sweden on a visit in Georgia express their “firm hope” that the upcoming elections will be an improvement on previous polls held in Georgia
5 September 2012	New US ambassador Richard Norland arrives in Georgia
6 September 2012	NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen praises Georgia for its reforms, but says that the upcoming elections will be a “litmus test” for the country's democracy
7 September 2012	NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen during an official visit to Baku says that he is “deeply concerned” over the pardoning of an Azerbaijani killer and adds that it damages trust and does not contribute to resolving the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

Compiled by Lili Di Puppò

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ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Lili Di Puppo, Iris Kempe, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Nana Papiashvili, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines

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