

Social processes in Modern Georgia: Is There any Potential for the Development of Russian-Georgian Cooperation?

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Abstract. The authors of the article, participants in the discussion "Georgia's Communication Regime: Development Trends," presented their views on social processes in modern Georgia. It is substantiated that the spiritual ties between Georgians and Russians are based on Orthodoxy and the mutual assistance that Russians and Georgians have provided to each other for centuries. The historical and cultural origins of Russian-Georgian relations are examined. The common historical past contributed to the interpenetration of cultures and traditions. However, under the influence of Western ideologies, a large part of modern Georgian youth has formed a different worldview. The authors of the article propose how to overcome the ideological gap through the implementation of cultural projects. Promising areas of cooperation between Russia and Georgia are considered in the absence of diplomatic relations and the anti-Russian position of the Georgian authorities. Youth communications and cooperation in the economy (primarily in agriculture) are also promising. The following risks of cooperation are considered: the unresolved issue of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, fluctuations of the political elites of Georgia, the chaotic nature of the Georgian economy, the role of anti-Russian position of Russians in Georgia, insufficient work with Georgian society on the Russian side and the need to activate the potential of the Georgian diaspora in Russia.

The article was prepared based on the materials of the international round table "Georgia's Communication Regime: Development Trends" (conducted by the National Research Institute for the Communications Development in December 2023).

Keywords: communication regime, Georgia, Russian-Georgian relations, Georgian Orthodox Church, Georgian economy, Georgian politics, Georgian political elite, humanitarian cooperation

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Introduction

Georgian society is one of the first post-Soviet societies to come under a massive information attack from Western European institutions and the United States with the aim of creating anti-Russian sentiments. Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia aggravated the situation and anti-Russian sentiments took hold for a long time. Georgian society, in general, welcomes Georgia's European integration (more than 80% of the country's population supports joining the EU); part of Georgian society views NATO as a guarantor of national security. The youth of Georgia have been brought up in unfriendly rhetoric and some of them have absorbed a hostile attitude towards Russia. However, the current state of Russian-Georgian relations is contradictory. On the one hand, diplomatic relations have been severed, the Georgian-Russian conflict on the issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has not been resolved, Georgia supports Ukraine's side in the Northeast Military District, Russia has been declared an aggressor, Georgia's partners and allies are countries unfriendly to Russia, Georgia is striving to join the EU and NATO. On the other hand, trade turnover between the countries is growing, business contacts are developing, air traffic has been restored, communications through the church continue, civil communications are supported, Georgian youth are studying at universities in Russia, according to quotas of the Government of the Russian Federation.

Research into the complex dynamics of Georgian society, which also affects relations with Russia, has been analyzed in recent years in scientific studies, monographs and articles 2020-2023 [1-11].

In order to identify possible areas for expanding Russian-Georgian communications, identifying priority areas and risks of communications between Russia and Georgia at the present stage, an international round table "Georgia's Communication Regime: Development Trends" was held, the materials of which formed the basis of this article.

Materials and Methods

The article was prepared based on the materials of the speeches of the participants of the international round table “Georgia’s Communication Regime: Development Trends.” The round table was held in December 2023 in Moscow at the National Research Institute for the Development of Communications. The round table participants included scientists, experts, representatives of economic, cultural, religious, and youth communications from Georgia and Russia. The positions of the participants were summarized and systematized. The most interesting opinions formed the basis of this article. In the process of preparing the article, methods of analysis, generalization, and systematization were used.

Results

Cultural, historical and spiritual community of Russia and Georgia (M. Sh. Tsikhelashvili)

The current stage of Russian-Georgian relations is characterized by the desire to negatively show the role of Russia in the history of post-Soviet countries. However, historically Georgia and Russia have been characterized by mutual assistance and friendship. History provides many examples that could form the basis for good neighborly relations today.

Diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia were established in the 15th century under the Russian Tsar Ivan III and the Georgian Tsar Alexander I. Thanks to these relations, Georgia strengthened and developed. With the help of Russia, it was possible to protect the Kartli-Kakheti kingdom from the raids of Persia and Turkey, which inflicted heavy damage on the Georgian principalities. In the 19th century, thanks to Russia, it was possible to unite the Georgian principalities and create a single Georgian nation, annexing the western lands. In turn, Georgia has always helped Russia in difficult war times. Let us give the example of Peter Bagration (an associate of Mikhail Kutuzov), the brothers Ivan and Semyon Panchulidze. Over 70 generals from Georgia fought in the Great Patriotic War. The soldiers of the Red Army Egorov and Kantaria erected the flag on the fascist Reichstag.

Spiritual roots connect Russia and Georgia. A common faith has always strengthened relations between peoples. Let us remember the story of the rescue of the Iveron Icon of the Mother of God, redeemed by Russia from “Persian captivity”; Church of the Holy Great Martyr George the Victorious of the Moscow Patriarchate, which was erected in 1750 and is currently the spiritual center of the Georgian diaspora in Moscow. By agreement between the patriarchs of the Russian and Georgian Orthodox Churches, His Holiness and Beatitude Patriarch Alexy and His Holiness and Beatitude Catholicos – Patriarch Ilia the Second – close friends from student days in the Trinity – St. Sergius Lavra – services in this temple are held in Georgian and Russian.

Another shrine is the basement of the Holy Don Monastery with the burials of princes from the royal family of Bagrationi, Dadiani and other grand-ducal families, under whose leadership the Georgians fought for the Fatherland. This great spiritual shrine emphasizes the spiritual unity of the two Orthodox peoples.

In Russia, Georgian saints are highly revered, and in Georgia, Russian saints are highly revered. Many Georgians, for example, consider St. Seraphim of Sarov their patrons. In addition, on the grave of the Glinsky elder Vitaly (Sidorenko) on the territory of the temple of St. Prince Alexander Nevsky in Tbilisi there are always fresh flowers. The Orthodox treat with reverence the saint, our contemporary, fool for Christ for the sake of Gabriel Urgebadze; holy confessor Tamar Marjanishvili (founder of the Seraphim-Znamensky convent with the blessing of St. John of Kronstadt in the village of Bitukovo, Domodedovo region), St. David of Gareji. Saint George is generally a revered saint for two nations; coats of arms with his image are the official symbols of cities and departments.

Until now, the peoples of Russia and Georgia treat each other with great sympathy and even love. The Georgian diaspora is widely represented not only in Moscow, but also in St. Petersburg, in the Tver and Yaroslavl regions, in the Krasnodar Territory (the village of Plastunka), in the Urals and Siberia.

Deep spiritual connections are manifested in modern cultural projects. An example is the recently developed project of the international youth ethnocultural festival “On the Path of the Ancestors Together.” This is the first large-scale project – a historical, ethnographic, cultural, religious, international music youth festival. It will take place in the fall of 2024 in Ingushetia (in Magas), in Ossetia (in Vladikavkaz), in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

A series of performances “On the path of our ancestors together” will be held in ancient fortresses/monasteries and museums in Georgia and Russia. Such projects contribute to the revival of Georgian and Russian traditional culture and history, and attract the attention of the public, youth, and foreign tourists to architectural monuments, to ancient monolithic objects that are of enormous historical and artistic value. The project emphasizes the inextricable connection between generations of the past, present and future. By integrating elements of the ancient, authentic culture and art of Russia and Georgia into modern culture, thus connecting the past and present, it is possible to establish connections for a common future.

The creative part of the Georgian diaspora in Russia (cultural and art workers), together with the Krasnodar public organization of disabled children and disabled children “Inva-Studio” and the Krasnodar scientific and rehabilitation center, implements art therapeutic master classes for people with disabilities. There are plans to adapt this experience for the rehabilitation of Northern Military District veterans who received severe wounds and injuries, depriving them of the opportunity to fully integrate into society.

Thus, Russia and Georgia have deep spiritual ties, the actualization of which in modern conditions becomes a condition for the development of Georgian-Russian relations and a guarantor of the preservation of the traditional values of both countries.

Conservative forces of Georgian society for traditional values (G. V. Gikashvili)

Western European influence on Georgia has formed part of the society with neoliberal values, which, under the guise of a struggle for rights and freedoms, blurs identity and reduces the ability of Georgians to understand and realize their civilizational identity. These people and groups perceive traditional values as archaic, limiting human freedoms and impeding progress. Meanwhile, most of society adheres to a conservative point of view.

The neoliberal agenda is not only supported, but also imposed on Georgia by European institutions. Thus, back in 2012, the European Court imposed monetary sanctions on Georgia due to the fact that during the parade of sexual minorities (organized in connection with the International Day against Homophobia), clashes occurred between parade participants and opponents of the popularization of neoliberal values.

The stronghold of the conservative part of society is the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Church (along with language, cultural artifacts, etc.) forms the civilizational identity and sociocultural code of Georgians, protects the foundations of traditional forms of family and relations between men and women, entering into confrontation with political institutions. Georgian Orthodox Church has a moral right to this, since ancient times it has participated in the construction of Georgian statehood. Moreover, today in Georgian society the authority and influence of Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II is high. In 2014, on his initiative, a public holiday appeared – the Day of Strength and Sanctity of the Family.

Representatives of conservative society in modern Georgia make up the majority, despite active propaganda and permissive policies towards LGBT people, etc. In addition, this fact should be taken into account when developing communications with Georgia. Joining efforts in upholding the priority of traditional values could bring Russian and Georgian societies closer together.

Politicization of Georgian media: the phenomenon of “Rustavi 2” (A. T. Sikharulidze)

The Georgian media space is politically based, as scientists and experts have repeatedly noted.

All rating media with a large audience are tools of one or another political force. Each political force in modern Georgia has its own media resources. It is unlikely that such media will provide objective coverage of even the noblest deeds. Georgian media resources have long ceased to be perceived as objective sources of information, as the fourth estate, which could form the information agenda and content independently of political forces. This should be taken into account when building Russian-Georgian communications.

The beginning of this process will be laid by the TV channel “Rustavi 2”, which remains in the memory of Georgians as an instrument of political struggle. At the beginning of his professional career, the famous Georgian businessman E. Kitsmarishvili said that if not for

“Rustavi 2”, the Rose Revolution would not have been able to happen. It was the popularity and trust of citizens in this TV channel that allowed in 2003 to gather masses on the streets of different cities of Georgia and force the government of E. Shevardnadze to recognize the crisis. If the red rose that Saakashvili carried into the country’s parliament as a sign of peaceful popular protest became a symbol of the revolution itself, then Rustavi 2 became a symbol of freedom of speech and the struggle for a better future.

After the change of power, M. Saakashvili, realizing the importance of this TV channel, took it under his control, removing the previous leadership (E. Kitsmarishvili) and appointing a new one. Rustavi 2 turned into a propaganda channel and gave impetus to the formation of a politically engaged media space in Georgia. The struggle for the political resource of “Rustavi 2” was also typical during the period of confrontation between the already former government of M. Saakashvili, the United National Movement and the new political force led by the “Georgian Dream”. A decades-long legal battle at the local and international levels was ended by a decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. He ruled that the TV channel was illegally seized from its owners during the reign of the United National Movement. Therefore, it must be returned to its rightful owners. This decision recognized at the international level the use of illegal methods against the independent media space by the government of M. Saakashvili.

This example shows the typical Georgian struggle for media resources by any means and their importance in the political confrontation. The media has stopped broadcasting objective information is a tool for promoting the interests of their owners.

Cinema as a potential area of cooperation (A. A. Khotivirshvili)

Georgian cinema celebrated its 115th anniversary in 2023. The only partially preserved full-length documentary film essay from 1912 is “Akaki Tsereteli’s Journey to Racha-Lechkhumi” by V. Amashukeli. During the Soviet period, about 1,200 Georgian films were shot at the Georgia-Film studio. The first Soviet film was “The Assassination of General Gryaznov” (1921, directed by I. Perestiani, scripted by Sh. Dadiani). Since 1928, the era of the rise of Georgian cinema begins. In four years, high-profile films were created: “Eliso” by N. Shengelaia (1928), “My Grandmother” by K. Mikaberidze (1929), “Jim Shvante!” M. Kalatozov (1930) and “Khabarda” by M. Chiaureli (1931).

Thanks to the support of cinematography in the USSR and the creative achievements of directors, the Georgian national school of cinema was formed. Georgian films have their own unique flavor, traditions and customs of Georgians, reflecting the features of the national character – the independent spirit of Georgians, openness and kindness, human joy of communication. In Georgian films, there is respect for each other, ethno-confessionalism and the desire for good-neighborly relations. The actors themselves gave zest to Georgian cinema. The legends of Georgian and Soviet cinema are V. Kikabidze, S. Zakariade, R. Chkhikvadze, S. Chiaureli, L. Kavzharadze, L. Abashidze and others.

Despite the new preferences of modern Georgian and Russian youth, these films could become a bridge to mutual understanding. Festivals of old Georgian cinema could become a new project for the organizers of humanitarian communications. With the correct positioning of the Festival, its organizers could bypass the restrictions of the communications regime with Russia in Georgia. These films are also important for the adaptation of new emigrants from Georgia to Russia. The Georgian diaspora in Russia notes that joint screenings of Georgian films and creative evenings bring emigrants together. The organization of such events is of interest to Russians [10].

Currently, the National Cinematography Center of Georgia contributes to the development of the country's film industry. Contemporary Georgian films actively participate in various festivals around the world. However, the lack of proper funding does not allow the development of Georgian cinema at the same level as it was in the USSR.

Needs and potential of the agricultural sector of Georgia (G. Tsopurashvili)

The agricultural sector of Georgia provides great opportunities for the development of Russian-Georgian relations. Back in the 1930s, comprehensive resource studies were carried out in Georgia in the USSR and the soil-climatic and territorial-microzonal capabilities of the territory were identified. Georgia produced tea, citrus fruits, tobacco, the best-tasting fruits, early vegetables, wine and wine materials, essential oils, high-quality silks and much more for the entire USSR. Georgian brands are also remembered in modern Russia.

Although today Russia is Georgia's number one agricultural partner, 15–20% of its potential is not used. To develop this potential, a number of problems need to be solved:

- achieve mutual understanding and respect in matters of political and diplomatic relations. For Georgia, the most important thing is territorial integrity and good neighborliness. For Russia, geopolitical interests in the Caucasus and peace. The restoration of diplomatic relations will give additional impetus to the cooperation process;
- create a Russian-Georgian information and analytical center for the development of large-scale projects, which will analyze and determine the prospects for cooperation and the direction of action. Currently, Western analytical centers operate in Georgia, including in the field of agriculture. Their activities are unsystematic and ineffective. If there were efficiency, then Russia would not be a vital trading partner for Georgia in the field of agriculture. Some recommendations of Western consultants harm the national interests of Georgia, establishing dictatorship in determining the directions and pace of development of the country's agricultural sector;
- within the framework of this center, it is necessary to develop targeted model programs: the creation of joint ventures, simplification of product supply and concluding contracts directly with manufacturers, product certification, implementation of the "green standard" and others.

The work of the Russian-Georgian information and analytical center would make it possible to overcome the inertial regime of communications. Today, Georgian agriculture needs an alternative effective strategy, a results-oriented action plan, access to particularly interesting traditional markets and the production of competitive products. It is unacceptable to delay the process and leave the country in "evolutionary inertia," therefore, deepening trade and partnership relations with the Russian Federation will give an incomparable impetus to the development of the industry, and there is no alternative to this today.

Discussion

Risks of Russian-Georgian relations (G. Rtskhiladze)¹

The outgoing year 2023 was marked by important events in Georgian-Russian relations, which officially, at the diplomatic level, do not exist. A certain positive background is due to the current coincidence of interests of the leadership of Georgia and Russia, which can hardly be called even situational allies, but the current situation is quite close to this definition.

Georgia, whose economy suffered greatly because of the declared "pandemic," was greatly helped by the rapid influx of Russian temporary migrants, as well as a jump in trade and transport turnover starting in 2022. Thanks to this, there was a rapid restoration of economic growth and filling the budget. Although this process is largely burdened by strong inflation, but still.

Russia has also become interested in an intermediate settlement of disputes with Georgia, in lifting the ban on air travel (which was introduced in 2019), the return of visa-free entry into the Russian Federation for Georgian citizens and other cosmetic concessions in order to secure its ground transportation from/to Turkey(s) and from / in Armenia(s). Russia needs a reliable rear in the Caucasus in the conditions of the Northern Military District in Ukraine. Russia has begun expanding and improving the territory of the Lars checkpoint to increase the throughput of this checkpoint.

Institutionally, the warming of economic relations between Russia and Georgia took shape in the Russian-Georgian Business Council under the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation. Russia is likely predicting strengthening economic ties. However, in our opinion, there are serious risks. In addition, any dialogue in Georgia has not yet marked the activities of the Council; consultative platforms and discussions are held mainly in Russia.

The West, pursuing radical goals in relation to Russia, naturally does not welcome Russian-Georgian cooperation. However, there is a danger that even without much

¹ The full version of the report is published by the author on the website geworld.ge. Available from: <https://geworld.ge/ge/sakartvelos-komunikatsiuri-rezhimis-ganvitarebis-tendantsiebi/>

pressure from the West, Georgia and Russia could slow down and even reverse the modest achievements in bilateral relations. Let us look at the reasons for this.

The problem of borders and possible escalation of the conflict. At the beginning of the Northeast Military District, there were calls from representatives of the Russian political establishment for the admission of South Ossetia (and, possibly, Abkhazia) into the Russian Federation. These initiatives were not confirmed at the level of the top leadership of the Russian Federation. The Parliament of South Ossetia initiated changes to the law on the state border, which could provoke reactions in Georgia that would violate the relative stability in the region. On the very border with South Ossetia, provocations from Georgia and the reaction of Russian border guards to them do not stop, which, in our opinion, is asymmetrical.

Fluctuations of Georgian politicians. The seriousness of Georgia's intentions to join the EU and NATO is determined by its dependence on Western countries and, above all, on the United States. Georgia's budget depends on Western investments and grants and loans (Georgia has a huge external debt). Representatives of the authorities have a personal dependence: their funds are invested in Western offshore companies, their children are trained and employed in the West, and they vacation mainly in Western countries. An illustrative example of total dependence is the attempt to pass a law on "foreign agents," which was abandoned due to pressure from the United States (and from not the highest person in the American political hierarchy). Thus, under fear of direct intervention by American diplomacy, the Georgian government will refuse cash injections from Russia, even if its representatives have a personal interest in this. The risks are too high. Even Georgian businessmen doing business in Russia, with connections in the power quarters of Georgia, will not be able to lobby for the interests of Russian-Georgian relations

After receiving candidate status for the EU, the Georgian government in relations with Russia will repeat the position of the EU. The value of this status is so high for the authorities that a Georgian citizen faces from 3 to 6 years in prison just for tearing the EU flag from the administrative building of the city of Mtskheta in protest against the status of a candidate for the EU and against the magnificent reaction to it event (the authorities organized massive street celebrations after confirming the status of a candidate in the EU).

The chaotic nature of trade and economic relations in the context of the insecurity of the Georgian market. Georgia needs the Russian market to sell wine (its main export) and agricultural products. Wine is exported, but the products of Georgian farmers (vegetables and melons) are difficult to sell even on the domestic market in conditions of cheap Russian imports. Investments by Russian business in the tourism and recreational system (land, hotels, and restaurants) often put local medium-sized businesses in a difficult position, among which discontent is growing. Pro-Western media replicate each case as official Russian policy aimed at destroying the Georgian economy².

2 Qartli.ge. Available from: <https://mix.metronome.ge/news/122992> (18.10.2023)

Western countries have developed programs to reduce "economic dependence on Georgia." They began to offer alternatives – cheap loans, technical support, advice on business development and marketing of agricultural products. Perhaps Russia should create an organization that will solve both commercial and social problems. In particular, it is centralized to accept surplus harvests of fruits and vegetables from Georgian peasants.

Russophobia with a Russian face. Image costs can also hinder the development of economic relations with Russia. Negative images of Russia are formed not only by Western countries, but also by Russians themselves. There are examples when on the stage of the Russian Drama Theater they hold actions in support of Ukraine with the transfer of funds in favor of the Armed Forces of Ukraine³; The director of the private Russian school "Intellect" banned a Russian language textbook for primary grades, since Russia was mentioned in this textbook. Moreover, this is done under pressure from organizations that monitor the correctness of the content of textbooks.

At the same time, there is another part of society in Georgia – people who are proud of the action of Givi Vanishvili, who specially came to Russia to participate in the SVO. To strengthen the trust of this part of society, reduce discontent and conflict potential, improve Russia's position in Georgia and vice versa, a number of steps are necessary.

Conclusions

An analysis of modern Georgian society and the considered risks of the development of Russian-Georgian communications show the need for a number of significant steps.

First, armchair diplomacy will not solve most problems. It is undoubtedly necessary to work with the Georgian authorities, but it is necessary to start working with society. Over the long period of their presence in Georgia, Western countries have managed to create a society that is indifferent or negative towards Russia. Supporters of Georgia's good relations with Russia feel themselves divided and in the minority. However, that does not mean they do not exist. Without working with the public, the development of Russian-Georgian relations will not be possible.

Secondly, when implementing large-scale economic initiatives, public approval should be built. For example, the territory adjacent to South Ossetia is often used to create provocative situations. At the same time, Russians, Ossetians, and Georgians are interested in opening transit roads. Therefore, it is necessary to start a public dialogue on the topic of

3 S. Kenya, the organizer of the play, has repeatedly spoken about the help from the proceeds from the play, which was staged in unprecedented numbers from October to December 2022, and this was printed on official posters. Among others, the Russophobe Mirzali-Zadeh, who was deported from the Russian Federation for Russophobia, performed in the performance banned in Russia. See: Arno Khidirbegishvili "Don't play theater!" (10/24/2022). Available from: <http://ru.gruzinform.ge/news/55483/arno-Khidirbegishvili-ne-igrajte-teatrom-.html> ; Radio "VeraTV" – "Dmitry Potapenko, Sergo Kenya" (07.09.2022). Available from: <https://youtu.be/33RStiXmv7c> (from 1:19:20); "Funds from each performance go to help Ukraine" (10/30/2022). Available from: https://www.facebook.com/KomliTheatre/?locale=ms_MY

transit economics between representatives of the public of Georgia and South Ossetia with the assistance of Russia (according to the principle “we discuss what is beneficial to the parties”). Without this preparatory work of society (as well as without preparatory work with society), it is risky to begin large-scale projects. The project may be blocked by public resistance actions.

Thirdly, it is necessary to work with young people. At a minimum, start working with those undergraduate and graduate students who come to Russia from Georgia. Most of them then remain in Russia, but are not involved in any way in the public dialogue between Russians and Georgians. These young people are more interested in friendly relations between Georgia and Russia than others. The Georgian diaspora could implement this initiative and create the so-called “Alumni”.

Fourthly, there are themes that unite our peoples. This is a common history, culture (for example, Georgian cinema in the USSR), traditional values, the memory of I. Stalin, etc. Despite the ambiguity of assessments of his personality, Stalin’s role in world history creates a reason for pride for Georgians. Cultural projects could be built around memorable events of a common historical past.

Fifthly, Orthodoxy unites Russians and Georgians. The common task is to promote in every possible way the development of the Georgian Orthodox Church and to counteract schisms, politicization of the church and political pressure on clergy (which is observed, for example, in Ukraine and Moldova).

Sixth, the development of economic cooperation and trade relations between Russia and Georgia seems to be more institutionalized and manageable. It is advisable to create a Russian-Georgian center for analysis, development of strategies and projects for economic cooperation, and the creation of a more open and manageable infrastructure for business participants.

All these proposals can be implemented subject to minimal legal and political conditions. In this regard, the elections in Georgia 2024 are of utmost importance, since the norms and rules of communications with Russia will depend mainly on the winning political force.

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