Paradoxes of Georgian-Abkhazian Relations, Self-Determination, Ukraine

“If tomorrow Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia want to be together again, no matter what form of living together they choose, the Russian Federation will not interfere in this process.” - Vitali Naumkin - professor, the head of the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS.

Few are able to keep up with the ongoing events in Russia’s ‘near abroad’, as the standoff between Russia and the West over events in Ukraine is filling the media attention but changing its form and content every day. However the double standard of “self-determination” being applied by the Western powers is not going unnoticed in Georgia.

Some suspect that the Western interest in Crimea, recent as it is – is not only geopolitical but connected to offshore energy reserves. Though it has made no great effort to assist the area before, Crimea is suddenly flavor of the month in Western discourse as it is now has become a part of the Russian Federation following the recent popular referendum, though this vote could be interpreted more as a reaction to radical elements in the new self-proclaimed government in Kiev than a genuine desire to become part of another country.

While everything concerning Ukraine is seemingly being reported ad nauseam in the media, one event which has gone unnoticed is the visit of a group of Russian experts and political scientists to Tbilisi in late February. Meeting their Georgian counterparts, they held high-level political discussions and talked about ways of improving Russian-Georgian relations. Any progress in this area could of course provide crucially important models for resolving the conflicts in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and many other places where similar forces are at work, and their proxy militias are involved.

One of the members of this expert group, Vitali Naumkin, Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and member of the Academic Council of the Russian International Affairs Council gave an interview to the Georgian media. Naumkin is a leading expert on the Arab World, Central Asia and the Caucasus and the editor and co-author of “Central Asia and Transcaucasia: Ethnicity and Conflict”, published in the USA in 1994, and “Russian Oriental Studies”, a collective monograph.

Question and Answer with Vitali Naumkin

Taking into account that for the last 20 years Georgian-Russian relations have been very strained, and after the August war of 2008 they have obviously worsened, what is your perspective on the prospects for Russian-Georgian relations at the present time?

The agenda of any future discussions should be based on those real changes in relations which are already occurring. By these I mean the returning of Georgian products to the Russian market, the restoration of transport links, the relaxation of visa regulations and, most importantly, the considerable improvement in the climate in bilateral relations. We could not have imagined this level of improvement even a year ago. I think some rapprochement has actually begun, but of course this in itself will not resolve the key areas of dispute between the two countries, which are connected to South Ossetia and Abkhazia.
I think we should not be satisfied with resolving only trade, transport and visa issues. We should address all the problems between the two parties equally, including the differences of opinion over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is clear that Georgia will not reconcile itself to the loss of these territories and cannot recognise their independence. Russia was not in fact planning to recognise their independence, but having done so, after the August war of 2008, it cannot now reverse this decision. Nevertheless, it is still possible to discuss ways of resolving this issue.

We should first of all discuss under what circumstances the Russian public would accept a reversal of recognition. It is conceivable that at some point in the future the South Caucasus republics will move closer to one another; they will cease being afraid of each other, forget the problems over which they separated and consider having closer relations, based on confederation; this would be seen as a partial restoration of the previous political arrangement, and in such circumstances a reversal of recognition would be acceptable to Russian public opinion.

Though I am talking about public opinion here, experts will discuss the issue further. But if tomorrow Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia want to be together again, no matter what form of living together they choose, the Russian Federation will not interfere in this process. If Armenia and Azerbaijan join them, and resolve the problem of Nagorno Karabakh in the process, Russia will only welcome such an outcome.

**Are you talking about establishing a confederative Georgian Republic or a Confederation/Federation of the whole South Caucasus?**

It does not matter whether this state is a Caucasian Federation or a new form of Georgian state based on the principles of Confederation or Federation. This is up to the people living in these territories, it is not Russia’s decision. Georgia has lost its attractiveness for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but why should we not discuss what would happen if this situation changed? Discussion on this theme is possible.

Some Western countries are establishing economic relations with Abkhazia and cooperating with Abkhazia. The situation is changing; Georgia itself is inclining to the position that it can regain sovereignty over Abkhazia and South Ossetia by establishing new relations with them. There are various formulas for rebuilding relations in existence. The examples we know of indicate that if the goodwill for the constructive development of relations between Russia and Georgia does exist these relations should be discussed with experts.

We are not politicians, we are experts, and why should we not discuss themes which have not been considered before if a situation cannot be resolved by diplomatic means? All the parties, Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the one side and Georgia on the other, are insisting that their positions are irreconcilable, but it is precisely in such situations that we need to discuss subjects which are always being brushed aside. The questions no one will discuss should not hinder the development of normal relations between Russia and Georgia.

There are economic interests at stake. Russia and Georgia have a common religion and are culturally close. Both face common dangers, including those posed by extremism coming from the South, which may endanger the Orthodox population. These dangers will increase once the United States departs from Afghanistan. From this perspective we should seek collective ways to address such dangers. There are many questions for discussion, and experts can replace politicians when it comes to discussing certain issues.

**We will return to South Ossetia and Abkhazia later. The new Georgian government has declared more than once that the Georgian people have chosen European integration. During his recent visit to Washington Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili declared that “Georgia will not revise its European choice.” For Georgia the most important question is - what policy will The Kremlin now adopt towards Georgia?**

I will start by saying that I am not speaking on behalf of The Kremlin, and I am not a fortune teller. I am an analyst and political scientist, but I categorically disagree with your analysis of the events in Ukraine. I believe that Russia did absolutely nothing to create any sort of problems for Ukraine.

I discussed this theme with my American colleagues earlier today. If we compare how Russia and the West have acted in Ukraine, two quite different pictures emerge. Russia has not interfered in the events in Ukraine. Have any agitators entered Ukraine from Russia? Our press has been calm and nobody has made extreme comments about the opposition.

We should bear in mind that Tymoshenko fell from grace because she made a gas deal which was not acceptable to the people; this is a fact. That’s why I disagree that Russia has played any part in the developing of events in Ukraine. Our envoy in Ukraine was neither seen nor heard at any point.
The only thing Russia did was offer to help Ukraine, and so did the West. The West is now telling us – let’s help Ukraine together. Most likely this will happen after the elections on May 25, when Ukraine has a legitimate President. The only action Russia actually took during the conflict was to temporarily close the border with Ukraine.

Yes, Russia said that if Ukraine signed an agreement with EU, Russia would defend its market and change the customs regulations at the Russian-Ukrainian border. But if it does not do this goods from the EU will enter Russia via Ukraine and the Russian budget will suffer, it will lose significant tax and excise.

What about the second part of the question?

I think the events in Ukraine will not affect Russia’s policy towards Georgia. Georgia does not face the problem of having to choose between the Customs Union and “deepening relations” with the EU. Georgia’s position on the EU is clear. If you achieve greater EU integration this is fine. Nobody is putting obstacles in your way. The only thing Russia disagrees with is the idea of Georgia joining NATO, but this should come as no surprise to anybody, as Russia is not willing to have NATO military bases near its borders, as such a prospect is not a friendly one.

How do you think the events in Ukraine will be reflected in Russian policy in the wider post Soviet area?

It is difficult to say at this point. Now a time out is being taken. Everyone is watching and waiting closely, seeing how things will turn out in Ukraine. I think everything will end up the opposite way round to how we might expect. The Customs Union will be strengthened, and the Russia-Belarus- Kazakhstan Eurasian union too, but to begin with neither will include Ukraine, as we do not know who will come to power in Ukraine after the elections.

One serious problem has developed as a result of the events in Ukraine but it is economic, not political. A number of Russian products, including military hardware, contain essential parts manufactured in Ukraine, motors and many other things. If Ukraine develops closer relations with the EU very rapidly we will be obliged to take protectionist measures and start manufacturing these components in Russia. If this happens the Ukrainian manufacturers will close, as this is the natural consequence of such measures.

So you believe that despite the drama in Kiev, creating the Eurasian Union is still on The Kremlin’s agenda?

Yes, exactly. With or without Ukraine the Eurasian Union will be created.

In the opinion of Georgian emigre Russian writer Boris Akunin, “President Putin is very concerned over events in Ukraine, and such fear is a bad indication”. How likely is a confrontation between Ukraine and Russia over Crimea?

The probability of such a conflict is zero, but other forces are involved. Russia is strongly defending the legal agreements made with the former Soviet Republics concerning its borders. You should take into account that before the war of August 2008 South Ossetia asked to join Russia and wanted a union with North Ossetia. Moscow categorically refused this request, as Russia recognised the legal borders between Russia and Georgia.

Nowadays we are concerned with Crimea; the locals asked Russia to help defend the rights of the ethnic Russian population, which are being violated there. To resolve these problems, the political parameters of providing assistance to the Russian population and those who share one faith are being discussed. This is normal, and if any of these people wish to resettle to Russia the state will help them financially.

In the today's world when international diplomacy has been reduced to a stream of groundless accusations in the respect of those not agreeing with NATO and the media that has turned its back on the objective covering of the events around the world, it has become increasingly important to listen to the words of true scientists that can share a deep insight into today’s agenda, as science is based on truth and not short-term political expediency.

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