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Russian Policy towards Georgia since 1991*

On December 8, 1991 Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevitch, the Russian, Ukrainian, and Byelorussian leaders, signed the Belavezha Accords, which marked the end of the USSR. Before the end of the year the Soviet Union was officially dissolved and all the remaining Soviet Republics (since the Soviet Union recognized the independence of the Baltic States in September 1991, there number was 12 at the moment) became independent. Georgia, which declared the restoration of her independence on April 9, 1991, prior to any of other remaining Soviet republic, was among them.

Georgia was meeting independence in a very difficult situation. There already was conflict in the so-called South Ossetia, where the Soviet government was supporting the Ossetians against the Georgians. The tension between the government and opposition, which began in September 1991, transformed into the armed conflict on December 22, 1991. To the present day it is difficult to find out how actively was the Soviet KGB involved in the confrontation between the government and opposition but there are numerous signs that the Soviet government was helping both sides at least at the different stages of the conflict, if not simultaneously. The flight of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia first to Armenia (January 6, 1992) and then to Chechnya, did not end the conflict and the civil unrest continued in the different parts of Georgia, especially, in Samegrelo and Abkhazia. The supporters of President Gamsakhurdia were especially strong in both regions. Although the new government was able to take control over both regions in February 1992, the confrontation continued and numerous attacks on the trains and kidnappings resulted in the decision to move more troops to Abkhazia (August 14, 1992) in order to restore the control over the railway tracks. The illegal “Abkhazian Guard” started the fire and this

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marked the beginning of the hostilities in Abkhazia. The insurgents were immediately helped by the Russian troops, which were still located in Abkhazia. It is impossible to determine at the present whether Boris Yeltsin, the President of the Russian Federation, had anything to do with this, since it is probable that he had no effective control over the Russian army at that moment. It seems that army actually obeyed the Russian Vice-President Alexander Rutskoy, who was the General of the aviation. The latter was supporting the Abkhazs from the beginning. As a result, during the 1992-1993 war in Abkhazia, the Russian troops were actively participating in the hostilities on the insurgent side. The Russian planes bombed the Georgian positions and their artillery was shelling civilian targets in Sokhumi. Since the Abkhazs were sure that the Russian troops would back them, they broke every cease-fire. On September 16, 1993 they broke another agreement and launched an offensive on Sokhumi. It coincided with the attacks of President Gamsakhurdia's supporters on the cities loyal to the new government in other parts of the Western Georgia. Although the hostilities between pro-Gamsakhurdia and pro-Shevardnadze troops were stopped and both parties agreed to unite their efforts against common enemy, it proved to be just a temporary phenomenon. On September 24, Zviad Gamsakhurdia returned to Zugdidi (Samegrelo) and this practically ended the common efforts. As a result, the Abkhazs, backed by the mercenaries from the North Caucasus and the Russian army, which at that moment openly supported Rutskoy in the confrontation that started in Moscow between Yeltsin and his opposition, seized Sokhumi and established their control over the most part of Akhazia. Although there are no official documents as yet to prove the involvement of the Russian government (at least, of Vice-President and other members of government and Russian Duma, who supported him) in Gamsakhurdia's return to Western Georgia, but there can be little doubts that the whole operation was planned by them.

In October of 1993 Yeltsin crashed his opposition, but the situation in Georgia did not change much. The territorial issues became the main problem in the Russian-Georgian relations. Yeltsin, who formally always supported the territorial integrity of Georgia, nevertheless, did not take any effective steps to ensure it. Officially, Russia declared the blockade of Abkhazia, but it was formal and ineffective. The most part of IDPs were not able to return to their homes and those ones who had it done, were doing it on their own risk. As a result, Yeltsin's attitude can be called as dubious and indecisive. One of the best examples of it is the situation with the Russian bases. On September 15, 1995 the agreement between Georgia and Russia was signed, according which the

Russian bases in Georgia were legalized for at least 25 years after the ratification of the document. Nevertheless, both sides have never ratified the document. The reason was the precondition, which was put forward by the Georgian side: before the ratification of the document by the parliament of Georgia, the Russians had to guarantee the restoration of the effective Georgian control over the Gali district in Abkhazia (this was considered as gesture, which would assure the Georgian side that the effective control over the other parts of Abkhazia would be established in time). Nevertheless, the precondition was never met. For several years the Russian side could not decide whether the game was worth the candles. In 1997 it looked like the Russians at last decided to give up the Gali district, but suddenly they changed their mind and Yevgeny Primakov, then the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, brought Vladislav Ardzinba to Tbilisi on August 14, 1997. The talks ended without result and after them there was no active Russian support of Georgian cause in Gali district. In 1998 there was a brief renewal of the conflict in Gali district, but the Russian “Peacekeepers” made nothing to defend the Georgian population, which had to leave their houses for the second time in five years.

The transfer of power in Russia, which happened at the end of 1999, marked the beginning of the new era in the Russian-Georgian relations. President Vladimir Putin started to lift officially the blockade of Abkhazia. It is highly probable that it was the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA that determined his future policy towards the former Soviet republics in common and to Georgia in particular. The Russian President figured out that as the U.S. ally in the “War on Terror,” he could change the official attitude towards the conflicts in Georgia. He became much more aggressive after the Revolution of Roses in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, since he was afraid that the popular demonstrations could oust him from power too. Therefore, he switched to the open support to the separatist forces in Georgia. He was not able to save Aslan Abashidze, the leader of Adjarian Autonomous Republic in May 2004, but decided to help the so-called “South Ossetian” leader Eduard Kokoity in July 2004. The reason was his fear that the new goal declared by the Georgian government seeking the membership in NATO and European Union as its top priority, would mean that the Russian ruling circles had lost control over the Caucasus.

It was a great blow for the Kremlin elite both for the political and economic reasons. The prospect of Georgia’s entry into NATO became the greatest menace for the Russian ruling circles because, from their point of view, it

means the end of their desire to restore the Soviet empire. With Georgia in NATO there would be no chance of using the military forces in South Caucasus. The two other South Caucasian states – Armenia and Azerbaijan – would also be lost. Moreover, for the Russian government Georgia's membership in NATO means the beginning of the new phase of the national liberation movement in the South Caucasus, which can even result in Russia's break-up. At the same time it will be meaning the loss of the commanding control on the energy supply sources for the Russian elite, since the oil or gas pipelines, which are already operating or will be built on the Georgian territory will be out of their range. The latter will result in the loss of the Russian influence not only in the Caucasus, but in the Central Asia too. The building of the new type of state in Georgia conducted by the new Georgian leadership was considered as a great menace by the Russian governing circles, because it would show that even in the post-Soviet space there can be built a state without the so-called "thieves-in-law", the state, where the police and bureaucracy stopped being corrupted. Therefore, the Russian government needed to change the Georgian government. Taking the control over Georgia would mean the end of NATO expansion, since neither Azerbaijan, nor Armenia would ever after question the Russian legacy in Caucasia. It would solve all the economic issues, since the control of the territory would mean the control of new pipelines, if anyone decided to build them here. It would show all other post-Soviet states that it was still Russia, which controlled everything in the post-Soviet space. The punishment of Saakashvili would be also a great lesson for those leaders, who did not obey the orders from Moscow. At first, the Russians tried to use economic blockade of Georgia, but this step eventually led to the diversification of Georgian economy and the improvement of quality of Georgian products. The expulsion of several thousands of Georgian citizens from Russia following the so-called "spy scandal" also did not help much. Then it was decided to finance the anti-government movement in Georgia. This time the Russian governing circles came close to the fulfilment of their plans. Along with all their successes, the Georgian government had made several mistakes, which caused irritation in the certain circles of the Georgian society and resulted in big manifestations in Tbilisi. Although most people never knew that Badri Patarkatsishvili, the main conductor of the events, was playing the Russian game, it still caused the political crisis and Russia nearly got its objective. Despite this, the snap presidential and parliamentary elections ended with victory of Mikheil Saakashvili and National Movement and the only way for Russians to overthrow the Georgian government was the

military involvement. The timing was also appropriate. At Bucharest summit (April 2008), the NATO leadership, following the demand of France and Germany, refused to give Georgia MAP (Military Accession Plan), which considers an eventual membership in NATO. After it, the Russian military aggression against Georgia was just a matter of time, and the time came in August 2008. Vladimir Putin, using the non-existent “Kosovo Precedent,” openly invaded Georgia and after the brief war recognized the “independence” of Abkhazia and so-called “South Ossetia.”

The 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia proved that Mikheil Saakashvili was not the problem in the Georgian-Russian relations. The government of Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili officially declared that it would change to the better the relations with Russia and stop the “provocative rhetorics” towards the Russian government. The rhetoric has changed but the political relations did not improve and even worsened. The Russian government started to fence off the occupied territories and kidnap the Georgian citizens. Hundreds of acres of previously not-occupied Georgian territory were fenced off beginning from 2013. This process continues to the present. The Russians even started to kill the Georgian citizens at the territory, which is controlled by the official Tbilisi. In overall, despite the restoration of trade between two states, the political situation remains unstable and no effort from the Georgian government can change it. Despite the numerous meetings between the special representatives Zurab Abashidze and Grigory Karasin, there is no progress in political situation. While the Russian attitude towards Georgia remains the same and the Russian government recognizes the “independence” of Abkhazia and so-called “South Ossetia” there will be no chance of the restoration of normal political relations between Russia and Georgia.

Summarizing the situation, it can be said the following: The problem is not in the Georgian attitude towards Russia, it is in the Russian attitude towards Georgia. There is practically no difference in the Russian attitude towards the Georgian leaders. Russian government did not like neither Zviad Gamsakhurdia, nor Eduard Shevardnadze. There is no difference in Putin’s policy either towards Mikheil Saakashvili’s or Georgian Dream governments. The problem is that the Russian government still considers Georgia as the part of her empire. The problem for the Russian government is independent Georgia, not her course or her leaders.