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ABOUT US

Partnership for Social Initiatives (PSI) was founded in Tbilisi, Georgia in January 2000 as an independent, nonpartisan think tank—research and educational organization dedicated to the study and advancement of public policy. Through its research, conferences, publications, and seminars, PSI advocates public policy based on the principles of virtuous citizenship, honor, dignity, and representative liberal democracy—just government, rule of law, individual liberty and responsibility, pursuit of happiness, and private enterprise.

RUSSIA-GEORGIA RELATIONS: A VIEW FROM GEORGIAN LEADERS

By Irakly Areshidze

“In an exercise of megaphone diplomacy, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s closest associates are seeking American consent to Russian ‘anti-terrorist’ military intervention in the pro-Western country of Georgia,” writes Vladimir Socor in *The Wall Street Journal* on August 14, 2002. “The Kremlin apparently hopes to goad Washington into an ‘Iraq-for-Georgia’ tradeoff: It’s signaling that Russia might not object to U.S. military action against Saddam Hussein some months down the road, if America tacitly condones a Russian military action in Georgia right now.”

Russian verbal critique of Georgia, ostensibly because of Tbilisi’s willingness to shelter so-called “terrorists” in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, recently reached hysterical proportions. The governmental and media anti-Georgian propaganda has been coupled with significant military activity against Georgia by Russian forces. At least five times since mid-July, Russian warplanes have bombed Georgian territory. As well, earlier this week, armed men in the separatist Georgian province of Abkhazia crossed into area around Kodori, which is controlled by the central authority in Tbilisi, leading to a confrontation which nearly escalated into a new war. The separatists, who achieved victory over Georgia with Russian aid and for a decade have been dependent on Russian support, always follow messages from Moscow in their activity vis-à-vis Georgia.

The situation in Abkhazia was resolved after marathon negotiations between Georgian officials and Abkhaz de-facto Prime Minister Anri Jergenia. However, the relationship between Russia and Georgia remains tense, and it is highly likely that new provocations will follow.

For an analysis of the situation in Abkhazia, Pankisi, and the overall state of the Russian-Georgian relationship, on August 15, 2002, I spoke with two senior members of the Georgian leadership— Minister for Special Assignments Malkhaz Kakabadze and Chairman of the Parliament’s Committee on Defense and Security Irakli Batiashvili. Kakabadze was appointed to his current post a little over two years ago, and previously served as Ambassador to Russia and Deputy Foreign Minister. Batiashvili resigned his post as Head of the Department for Information and Intelligence (the current Ministry of State Security) in 1993 to protest Georgia’s entry into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and now is one of the leaders of the New Rights Party. He was elected the Chairman of the Defense Committee in May 2002.

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INTERVIEW WITH MALKHAZ KAKABADZE

What happened in Abkhazia this week, and why did this happen?

It might sound odd, but given that there is a conflict situation in Abkhazia (which of course it is an indivisible part of Georgia), there is a conditional division of the territory by zones. There is a zone that Georgians control, the Kodori Gorge region and territory surrounding it, and others parts of Abkhazia which are controlled by the separatist government. The Abkhaz side broke the provisional line between these two zones, crossed into the area controlled by Georgia, and opened up posts. This of course stirred a reaction from the Georgian side. It is important to note that there are no Georgian army units in Kodori. There are members of the Border Guard, which is an independent unit of the government, it carries police functions, and it is a Western-style unit, unlike the Soviet-era border troops, which were part of the military.

With the efforts of the Border Guard units and the local population, the building of the Abkhaz posts was stopped. There was indeed some firing from both sides. Mr. Avtandil Jorbenadze [Georgia's State Minister], Head of Border Guard Department Mr. Valeri Chkheidze, and I went to Kodori in order to try to resolve the situation. Mr. Emzar Kvitsiani, President's representative to Kodori, joined us, and we sat down for a discussion with the Abkhaz side, and presented to them on a map our point of view about the situation and the crossing of the provisional zone-line by the Abkhaz side. The Abkhaz side shared our view. It appeared to us that the Abkhaz side is not supporting the escalation of the situation—that someone is forcing them to escalate it, in order to drive the negotiation process into a corner. These negotiations with the Abkhaz side are now entering the most critical phase, the discussions of the political status, and someone is trying to sabotage these discussions. In this, fundamentally, the Russian side has an interest. As well, for some reason, Russia has a view that it must control the Kodori region. There have been a few offers, all rejected by the Georgian side, to open posts of Russian "peacekeepers" there. It seems to us that this element was partly responsibly for the incident.

Some have argued that with the pressure on Pankisi from the Tbilisi authorities, Russia, and the West, the Chechen fighters in Pankisi are now returning back to

Russia, and notwithstanding Moscow's claims of fighting terrorists, it is not in Russian interests that these fighters return. As a result, some argue that Russia wants these fighters to move to Abkhazia, where new provocations could be created. What do you make of this analysis?

Last year, something like this happened, with the Gulaiev incident, or operation. I do not have all information, but Russian special units were involved in this incident. It appears that the Chechen side had an agreement with the Russian side that the border would be open, but then Russian side and the Abkhaz side betrayed them, and the border was closed. These people then were left on their own, and were forced to fight, but that they had not intended to fight originally. I believe in this version because Russia needs to find a new Pankisi in Georgia, and if Chechen fighters enter Abkhazia, then this will be a significant problem, and it will be easy for Russia to create provocations there.

It is universally believed in Georgia, both by analysts and the citizenry, that Russian actions, both in Abkhazia and in Pankisi, are aimed at creating chaos in Georgia. Do you agree with this view, and if so, why does Russia want chaos in Georgia?

Of course, the goal is chaos. Certain circles in Russia cannot get used to the idea of Georgian independence, or to the role that Georgia is developing in the international scene. I have in mind the international projects, the independent foreign and domestic politics of Georgia, and the course Georgia's choice to build relations with the European-Atlantic structures. Of course these circles wish to bring to Georgia a government which will be under their control. I can declare with full confidence that even if these circles and forces try to achieve something, such a political force will not be able to come to power in Georgia. A force with such a perspective will not be accepted by the Georgian people.

Some see a coincidence or a relationship between Russian, and specifically, President Putin's demands, regarding Georgia and its leadership, and claims made by political forces here in Georgia. Do you see a relationship between these demands?

I do see a relationship. But I must tell one and the other that Shevardnadze will continue to serve as Georgia's President, while those people might disappear, I have the political arena in mind.

INTERVIEW WITH IRAKLI BATIASHVILI

How do you account for the recent escalation in the relationship between Georgia and Russia?

Events in Pankisi and Kodori are connected to the Russian unwillingness to accept Georgian independence, and are means of psychological terror on Georgia. Start with the media propaganda. Then add to it provocations, such as bombing of Georgian territory—Russia has wonderful intelligence services, who know very well where to bomb and where not to, and where potential armed forces might be located in Pankisi. Russia was purposefully bombing unpopulated areas, because the bombing was not aimed to kill Chechen forces, but was a source of psychological warfare against Georgia. Similarly, in Kodori, or to be accurate, in the Marukhi Pass, the appearance of armed forces was yet another method of psychological pressure aimed at further complicating the situation. The goal is for our society to always be under Russian pressure and fear of further escalation in the relationship with Moscow.

Having just returned from Kodori, I believe it is too early to say that the situation is fully resolved there. These were very well trained forces—it must have taken a long time for these forces to be trained—and they have only moved back a few kilometers. Tomorrow the situation might become just as tense as it was on Monday and Tuesday. The fact is that Abkhazian separatist government does not wish war. They control the territory, and they wish peace so that more tourists can come to Abkhazia. However, Russia controls the separatist government, and it is highly likely that the armed forces appeared in Marukhi under Russian pressure.

Georgian government has to be very careful. It is critical for us to deal with the situation in Pankisi. The local population there—the Kisti [ethnically Chechen Georgians] population—is coming out and saying, we do not want Russian forces here, we want the Georgian government to take care of the criminals. However, we have to be careful, because it is likely that our neighbor is prepared with new provocations to further escalate the situation and involve us in a serious conflict. I do seriously hope that Georgian actions will be well designed and will be supported by the local population.

Why do you think Russian government has tried to escalate the situation so quickly and so radically?

There are three main factors. First, the recent successes connected to the oil and gas pipelines which are well known. Second, the Train and Equip Program and the appearance of U.S. forces in Georgia. This program—the U.S. military assistance and cooperation in general—is the greatest source of security for Georgia—Russia knows this very well. Third, the fact that Georgia is not willing to allow Russia to conduct “anti-terrorist” operations in Pankisi, which would mean spreading the Chechen war into Georgia and involving our country in a regional Caucasian war. Even during Yeltsin’s time, Russia was demanding that our territory be used to bomb Chechen forces. Georgia rejected this then, and the relationship between Georgia and Russia soured significantly. Today you have similar demands.

Though it is also likely that there are more global reasons for why Russia is acting so aggressively at this time. There was a story in *The Wall Street Journal* yesterday, for example, which speaks to the possibility that Russia wishes the U.S. to trade Georgia for Iraq. In other words, if U.S. has the right to conduct operations in Iraq, something that worries Russia a great deal and is completely unacceptable for them, and if U.S. does act and justly remove the Hussein regime, U.S. authority in the world will increase and Russian will fall. Therefore, Russian action in Georgia might very well be a response to American planned action in Iraq.

Russia politicians from the President on down are often quoted as saying that Georgia and Russia will not have good relationship so long as Eduard Shevardnadze is Georgia’s President. In my conversations with a variety of Georgian officials, these Russian claims and demands sound to them as similar to claims of some local politicians in Georgia. Is this possible similarity between Russian pressure and actions of Georgian politicians just a coincidence, or is there a relationship?

To pressure Georgia, Russian intelligence always uses forces inside Georgia. This might be a political force, or other contingents that they might control, in political, economic, or security sectors of Georgian life. Certain political forces in Georgian, possibly unwillingly, are helping Russia.

The biggest goal for Russia in Georgia is to get rid of Shevardnadze, and to prove to Georgian people that if Shevardnadze is gone and a new, pro-Russian, political force comes to power then all of the problems that complicate the relationship between Georgia and

Russia will suddenly be solved. This is pure nonsense, of course. We all recall, when in early period of Shevardnadze's rule, Georgia chose, briefly, a pro-Russian course. A number of pro-Russian Ministers, including Vardiko Nadebaidze in Defense and Igor Giorgadze in State Security, were appointed, and Georgia even joined the CIS and was ready to permit Russian forces to stay for 25 years—what did we get for all this? Nothing! To base our national security and territorial integrity on these primitive claims from Russia is silliness. Our future is dependent on economic strength, on political stability, and on building up our armed forces, which will be the only real guarantor for Georgia's territorial integrity in the future.

In addition to being the Chairman of the Committee on Defense, you also are one of the leaders of a dominant pro-U.S. political force in Georgian politics. Your party is simultaneously in loyal opposition to the President. If the New Rights Party were to be in charge of Georgia today, how would it act? Would its policies differ significantly from those that the current government is undertaking?

In terms of responding to Russia, our actions would probably be the same. For example, it was Shevardnadze's command to the Georgian forces, that even under attack from Abkhazian side in Kodori, our forces had to mount only a minimal response, to ensure that the situation in Marukhi would not escalate into a war.

However, there is much to do in terms of strengthening the Georgian hold on Kodori. As well, in Pankisi, I think we probably would have started to arrest criminals, both Georgian and foreign, a long time ago. Our government's inaction regarding the Pankisi problem, which first and foremost possess criminal danger to Georgia, has given Russia an excuse, a pretext, to pressure Georgia.

In general, for our party, national security is the critical issue for Georgia's future. Our party, and its leader here in Parliament, David Gamkrelidze, believes that questions of national security and military reform require a wholly new conception which is based on the geopolitical realities of our region. This is the conception that our party is working to develop. The initiative to have me be elected Chairman of the Defense Committee was precisely to help advance the military reform and the relationship with the United States and NATO. I decided to accept this position based on our party's belief that there is nothing more

important for the country's future than securing its independence and sovereignty.

Finally, you mentioned your goals of reforming the armed forces. Could you speak specifically about the sort of reforms that you would like to implement?

We need to overcome the psychological barrier which prevents reform in the Ministry of Defense. We require serious staff changes so that people who oppose reform are removed—we can come up with a wonderful structure, but so long as you have the present staff in the Ministry, nothing will change. Georgia is receiving advice from a variety of sources—NATO, foreign national security advisors, and others. All recommendations are the same—Georgia must cut the size of the army, to make it mobile and no larger than what Georgia can afford. In addition to the structural changes, the civil control of the armed forces is critical—the Parliament's oversight role is important and the Minister must be a civilian. The relationship that currently exists between the General staff, the Minister, and the services needs to be changed. We need to reform and reorganize the military education system. Our committee, I hope, will be the force which will move these stalled reforms forward.

To bring about these changes, we must move beyond political intrigue. Over the last several months, many news stories appeared in the Georgian press alleging that our Parliamentary leader, David Gamkrelidze, wants to be Minister of Defense, and all of our actions are somehow connected to bringing this about. I must say here, yet again, because I do not want my calls for reform to be misconstrued, that these allegations are absolute nonsense. Gamkrelidze is a wonderful manager, is extremely well educated, and is a good politician. But to claim that our actions in relationship to demanding reforms in the army are taking place because Gamkrelidze wants to be Minister—this is such a primitive level of politics that it is even hard to make a comment, and has no basis in reality or fact. We want reforms, not simply because of reforms, but because we want a good Ministry of Defense and an excellent army which can serve Georgia's needs.

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Opinions expressed in this piece are those of the author and individuals interviewed. Both interviews were conducted on August 15, 2002, in Georgian, and translated into English by the author.