



Georgia and Russia: Why and How to Save Normalisation

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What's new? On the eve of Georgia's elections, tensions with its breakaway regions and Moscow, especially at the line separating Georgian-controlled territory from South Ossetia, threaten trade and tourism links with Russia. Tbilisi's next government will have to decide whether to jettison or retain the "normalisation" policy that enabled those ties.

Why does it matter? Should normalisation collapse, future incidents along the lines of separation with both South Ossetia and its fellow breakaway, Abkhazia, could spiral out of control. Russian relations with Western states, to say nothing of Georgia itself, could sour further.

What should be done? The current normalisation dialogue avoids breakaway-related issues. To reduce friction, and to facilitate Russian support for trade and contacts across the lines of separation, Tbilisi and Moscow should start talking about them, while also expanding the Geneva format dialogues to better address tension at the lines of separation.

I. Overview

On 31 October, Georgia's citizens will elect a new parliament and government. The newly elected officials will inherit a difficult relationship with Russia, with which Georgia fought a war in 2008. Tensions with Moscow are especially high along the lines separating Georgia from its breakaway regions: primarily South Ossetia, but also Abkhazia. The strains could undermine a Georgian-Russian "normalisation" process that since 2012 has brought renewed trade and travel between the two countries. Some Georgian factions are seizing the moment to argue that normalisation is no longer useful and to push for a more confrontational approach toward Russia. But their strategy relies on substantial Western support, which is uncertain. Even if forthcoming, it might yield little but dangerous escalation. The better path is for Tbilisi and Moscow to build on their normalisation dialogue, expanding cooperation to help address the needs of people living in the breakaway regions and along the lines of separation. Simultaneously, they should reinvigorate their security dialogue to wrestle with emerging challenges at the lines of separation.

The fraught dynamics of the South Caucasus have a long history. During the time of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were autonomous regions within

Soviet Georgia. As the Soviet Union collapsed, ethnic discord turned violent, and Georgia lost effective control in the two territories. As fighting raged, thousands of ethnic Georgians had to flee their homes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia for other parts of Georgia. The breakaway regions have been unstable ever since. In August 2008, as tensions escalated between Tbilisi and both Tskhinvali (South Ossetia's self-proclaimed capital) and Moscow, hostilities flared once again. Five days of war followed, with Russian forces not only backing the breakaways but also entering Georgian territory. After the war's end, Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent. Few other countries followed suit, however, and reintegration of the breakaways remains Georgia's ultimate objective.

The normalisation process launched by Russia and Georgia in 2012 is a unique experiment in the post-Soviet space. These two countries, recently at war and with no diplomatic relations, began a direct dialogue on trade, humanitarian issues and other topics unrelated to their underlying conflict. Steering clear of sensitive security and political issues (which is to say, issues relating to the breakaways), the dialogue has over eight years rebuilt a variety of links between the two states and helped establish relative calm in Georgia. But today, with escalating tension along both lines of separation putting the future of the process at risk, normalisation can no longer ignore Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moreover, the failure of Russia and Georgia to include these regions in their discussions precludes important humanitarian dialogue between Tbilisi and the breakaways, as well as talks between them about such topics as Abkhazia's efforts to revitalise trade.

Renewed confrontation with Russia is not the answer, as it may well undermine Georgia's goals no less than Russia's and could escalate in dangerous ways. Rather, whichever party or group of parties wins Georgia's 31 October elections should take up the challenge of defining a new policy that helps calm frictions with Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as with Russia. Moscow, for its part, faces the challenge of finding ways to work with Tbilisi if it wishes to defuse tensions and perhaps encourage it to take steps that would ease the economic straits in which the two Russia-dependent statelets find themselves. One solution lies in building on the normalisation format. Its achievements to date create a foundation to explore new areas of cooperation between Tbilisi and Moscow, including issues relating to the breakaways, all in a way that will not require Russia or Georgia to revise the basic tenets of their respective positions on the statelets' political status. Rather, Moscow and Tbilisi can move forward with small steps to engender stability that better serves all parties.

II. Normalisation, “Strategic Patience” and Bilateral Security Dialogue

In 2012, dialogue between Georgia and Russia led to resumption of bilateral travel and trade through a process they termed “normalisation”. Both countries have reaped economic benefits from renewed ties. But Tbilisi and Moscow have made no progress on the core issue that divides them: the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two Georgian breakaway regions, which depend on Russia for political and financial

support and host Russian military bases.¹ The de facto governments' relations with Russia are so close that they both have former Russian officials serving in senior roles, particularly at ministries responsible for security.²

Normalisation was never meant to facilitate resolution of Tbilisi's disputes with Moscow over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, though it was not intended to prevent progress, either. Rather, it is a pragmatic process focused on matters of mutual interest that are unrelated to the breakaways. Shortly after a coalition led by the Georgian Dream party took office in 2012, Tbilisi initiated this process with a proposal to Moscow that both countries appoint special envoys who would meet regularly in person and by telephone. The approach was based in large part on proposals proffered by Zurab Abashidze, a Georgian diplomat who was then retired.³ Abashidze, who had served in Moscow and Brussels, came back to work to serve as Georgia's envoy. As his counterpart, Russia appointed its deputy foreign minister, Grigory Karasin. The two men know each other well, having begun their careers together at the Soviet foreign ministry. Although Karasin left diplomatic service for the Russian Senate in September 2019, he remains responsible for keeping up the contacts with Tbilisi.

Normalisation is reinforced by, and reinforces, another tension-easing doctrine introduced by the Georgian Dream coalition: "strategic patience". Strategic patience puts a premium on stable relations with Russia by imposing an informal requirement that Georgia's government take no action without considering how Russia might respond.⁴ For example, after Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014 and began military action in eastern Ukraine, Tbilisi voiced support for Kyiv, but it did not join Ukraine and Western countries in imposing wide-ranging sanctions on Moscow. While it imposed a ban on trade and financial transactions with Crimea, this measure mirrors Ukraine's restrictions on such dealings with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and is meant to signal solidarity with Kyiv while avoiding escalation with Moscow.⁵ By avoiding other sanctions, Georgia averted reciprocal steps by Russia, which would have undermined bilateral trade.

Normalisation made it possible for Georgia and Russia to talk trade and tourism, even as they remained deeply at odds over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which the two parties have dealt with in another format – the multinational Geneva International Discussions, which were created after the 2008 war to enable security dialogue

¹ See Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°53, *Georgia-Russia: Still Insecure and Dangerous*, 22 June 2009.

² David Batashvili, "'Surkov Leaks': Glimpse into Russia's Management of Georgia's Occupied Regions", *The Clario Brief*, October 2016. Also see the Rondeli Foundation's regular updates posted at its "Roadmap to Kremlin's Policies in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region".

³ Zurab Abashidze, "Russian-Georgian War: 20 Months Later" in George Khutsishvili and Tina Goleiani (eds.), *Russia and Georgia: The Ways Out of the Crisis* (Tbilisi, 2010), pp. 53-58.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, current and former officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

⁵ "Council Decision 2014/386/CFSP of 23 June 2014 concerning restrictions on goods originating in Crimea or Sevastopol, in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol", *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 183/70, 24 June 2014. Georgia has affirmed its continued adherence to the Crimea sanctions every year since, including in 2020: "Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol", press release, Council of the European Union, 18 June 2020. Crisis Group interviews, officials and foreign diplomats, Tbilisi, September 2020.

between Moscow and Tbilisi. The Geneva Discussions, which are mediated by the EU, the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), include participants from Georgia, Russia, the de facto entities and the U.S.

Unlike the normalisation dialogue, however, Geneva rounds have been repetitive and unproductive.⁶ To some extent, this is because the parties' positions on the most contentious issues between them leave little apparent room for compromise. Georgia sees Russia's support of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which dates back to the 1990s, and its recognition of their independence, as violations of Georgian sovereignty and deep affronts. It views Russia's military presence in and security support for the breakaways, as well as the involvement of Russians in the de facto governments, as part and parcel of an occupation of Georgian territory over which it wishes to regain control.⁷ But Moscow shows no sign of budging from its policies. One former Georgian official suggests that, having built military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to the south of its Caucasus mountain border, Russia has what it wants. It thus faces little incentive to make adjustments.⁸

But Tbilisi has also pressed for dialogue with Moscow on two topics well short of its long-term goal of regaining control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. First, as long as the status quo holds, Tbilisi wants to end limitations on access for the European Union Monitoring Mission to the breakaway regions. At present, this mission patrols only along the lines of separation to ensure compliance with the 2008 ceasefire agreement. But its mandate requires access to the breakaway territories as well, to provide third-party reporting on the situation there. Secondly, Tbilisi wants Russia to commit not to use force against Georgia.

Moscow rejects both of these demands. On the first, it argues that the monitoring mission's mandate for Georgia should not extend to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, because Russia (although not the EU) has recognised both as independent states. They are thus, to its mind, not part of Georgia. On the second, Russia insists that because it is a mediator – and not a party – in the conflict between Georgia and the two breakaways, it has no reason to pledge not to use force.

The result has been a frozen dialogue. In an effort to thaw it, Tbilisi asked if the conflict over the breakaways could be on the agenda for bilateral talks in 2014, when Moscow had invited the Georgian president to visit. Tbilisi repeated the request in 2015. In both instances, Moscow demurred, and the Georgian president's visits never took place.⁹ In 2018, Georgia's then-Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili proposed that he and his Russian counterpart meet in the Geneva format, but Russia declined.¹⁰ A year later, newly elected Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili proposed a Geor-

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, officials and de facto representatives, Moscow, Tbilisi and Sukhumi, April, July and August 2020.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020. Also see "Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's Speech at the Session of the UN General Assembly", Government of Georgia, 25 September 2020.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, former official, Tbilisi, August 2020.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, officials and analysts, Moscow and Tbilisi, March, August and September 2020.

¹⁰ "Statement by the Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili", official website of the Government of Georgia, 9 March 2018 (Georgian). Crisis Group interviews, current and former officials and analysts, Moscow and Tbilisi, March, August and September 2020.

gian version of the Normandy process for Ukraine: a series of summits of Russian, Georgian, French and German leaders.¹¹ She, too, was rebuffed.¹² Georgian leaders conclude that Russia is simply uninterested in a security dialogue.¹³ “We have nothing to offer them”, says a former senior Georgian official.¹⁴

There is some truth in the observation that Georgia lacks leverage. Unlike Tbilisi, which is pushing for monitors and a pledge of non-use of force, Moscow appears to be broadly satisfied with the status quo when it comes to its relations with Georgia.¹⁵ Although Russian officials often criticise Georgia’s links with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, including its military exercises with the former and its Association Agreement with the latter, as well as the robust advisory efforts of both organisations, they do not seem to be truly worried about them.¹⁶ To the contrary, Moscow believes that its 2008 intervention and continued troop presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia eliminated short-term prospects of Georgia joining NATO by ensuring that the two territorial disputes remain unresolved for the long term.¹⁷ Nor, in Moscow’s view, does the EU seem enthusiastic about including Georgia in the near future. Not only would doing so further complicate EU-Russian relations, but the organisation is deeply divided as to the benefits of continued expansion to the east in the face of Brexit and a welter of internal challenges.¹⁸

With Georgia unlikely to join either NATO or the EU any time soon, Moscow may be increasingly resigned to, and accepting of, Tbilisi nonetheless remaining outside its foreign policy orbit. Indeed, some in Moscow argue that Russia’s recognition of both breakaways was a mistake, in that it left Tbilisi with no strategic choice save the prospect of Western integration.¹⁹ “If we had recognised only South Ossetia, Russia could still have traded off the fate of Abkhazia”, one expert said.²⁰ The present situation may not seem ideal when seen through Russia’s eyes, but it appears to be acceptable.

Tbilisi’s inability to discuss Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Moscow further complicates prospects of direct talks between Tbilisi and de facto officials in the two break-aways. Russian opposition is not the obstacle: Russia is not, in principle, opposed to

¹¹ The Normandy Format for Ukraine brings together the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany to ensure senior-level commitment to agreed-upon actions that can help further the peace process. There have been six meetings in this format since the summer of 2014. “President Zura-bishvili speaks of recent developments in Georgia”, *Civil.ge*, 26 December 2019.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, current and former officials and analysts, Moscow and Tbilisi, March, August and September 2020. Also see Natalia Kochiashvili, “Kremlin answers Zourabichvili on ‘Normandy format’”, *Messenger Online*, 27 December 2019.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, politicians and officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, former official, Tbilisi, August 2020.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Moscow, March 2020.

¹⁶ On Georgia-NATO relations, see “Relations with Georgia”, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 26 March 2019. On Georgia-EU relations, see “Facts and Figures about EU-Georgia Relations”, Council of the European Union, undated. Crisis Group interviews, current and former officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, official and analysts, Moscow, March 2020. The 1995 study guiding NATO policy on enlargement requires prospective members to have settled any disputes peacefully. See “Study on NATO Enlargement”, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 3 September 1995.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, officials, analysts and foreign diplomats, Moscow and Tbilisi, March and July 2020.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Moscow, March 2020.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, analyst, Moscow, March 2020.

such dialogue, though it does little to facilitate it. Rather, Georgia fears that unless its talks with de facto officials are part and parcel of broader negotiations with Moscow, Russia might undermine those talks or use them to extract concessions. For instance, it could use the dialogue to argue that since Georgia is engaging with the breakaways as entities in their own right, Tbilisi and other capitals should recognise their independence.²¹ Tbilisi therefore is willing to engage with Abkhazia (which is now interested in trade, as South Ossetia is not) only if Moscow agrees and engages in substantive discussions on non-use of force against Georgia and EU Monitoring Mission access to both breakaway regions. In this way, Georgia could maintain its position that it is, in fact, negotiating with Russia even as it improves relations with Abkhazia.²²

Although they have not moved the needle on resolving the disputes over the breakaways, Georgian Dream coalition members nonetheless feel that strategic patience and normalisation have been successful.²³ Georgian Dream is the first governing party since the country's 1991 independence to avoid new wars or military confrontations during its tenure. Georgian officials believe that in an atmosphere of Russia-West tension, Tbilisi's direct contacts with Moscow help lower risks of a new military conflict between the two countries.²⁴ They also believe that the resultant stability in the South Caucasus has made it easier for Tbilisi to pursue greater cooperation with NATO and the EU, which has reached a historical peak with more regular exchanges, more economic cooperation with the EU and more joint military drills with NATO. Peace and stability, in their view, facilitate contacts and help convince Western officials that Georgia is a reliable partner; conversely, instability might cause the EU and NATO to back away from these ties, which bring their own benefits, even if they would not lead to membership any time soon.²⁵

Reduced antagonism between Russia and Georgia has also led to softened rhetoric and diminished suspicion on the part of Georgia and Georgians toward residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Until recently, one result was more visits from those regions to Tbilisi and other Georgian towns for medical care, family reunions and sometimes even shopping.²⁶ The uptick in traffic sharply contrasted with the period of quiet between the war's end in 2008 and 2012, when people rarely crossed the lines of separation.²⁷ But over the last two years, as tensions at the lines of separation have risen, crossing has become increasingly difficult.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, current and former officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

²² Crisis Group interviews, officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, politicians and officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, analysts and officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, officials, Tbilisi, August 2020.

²⁷ Also see Bradley Jardine, "New Georgian hospital aims to heal, and win, Abkhazian hearts and minds", Eurasianet, 5 February 2018; Dato Parulava, "Georgia's medical programme for Abkhazians and South Ossetians may be at risk", OC Media, 29 July 2020.

III. “Borderisation” Threatens Normalisation

Today, deteriorating conditions along the lines of separation between Georgia and the two breakaways, especially South Ossetia, are straining Tbilisi’s relations with Moscow and, in the process, threatening the future of normalisation.

In a series of activities that observers describe as “borderisation”, Russian and de facto South Ossetian security personnel are establishing something akin to borders along these lines, which, they say, are needed to prevent people crossing where and when they wish. They have fortified the boundaries with fences, lined them with ditches, installed security cameras and erected watchtowers, including in the middle of densely populated settlements that straddle the divide between Georgian-controlled and de facto South Ossetian-controlled lands.²⁸ Villagers have lost access to homes, fields and other property, and they face detention by de facto security personnel should they try to cross the line to see family. Some have been injured and even killed.²⁹

The Geneva framework includes two subsidiary dialogue formats (one each for Abkhazia and South Ossetia), called the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs), which are meant to give the parties a place to work out disputes that have led or could lead to incidents, as well as to convene security officials representing Tbilisi, the breakaways, Russia, the OSCE (for South Ossetia), the UN (for Abkhazia) and the EU Monitoring Mission for regular meetings. But to date they have repeatedly ceased work in the face of new incidents rather than resolved the underlying problems.

The IPRM for Abkhazia has not met for over two years, after a low-level de facto official killed an ethnic Georgian resident, Giga Otkhozoria, in 2017. The IPRM in South Ossetia stopped work in August 2019 after the Georgian government built a police outpost close to the line of separation to prevent Russian and de facto South Ossetian border guards from installing fencing on Georgian government-controlled territory in the village of Chorchana, a situation described in more detail below. In July 2020, the IPRM meetings resumed, but crossings remain closed and the de facto leadership continues to demand the outpost’s removal. As a result, residents cannot enter Georgian-controlled territory to collect pensions, buy cheaper food or get emergency medical care.³⁰

²⁸ According to the Georgian government, Russian and de facto security personnel have fortified more than 100km of the 500km that define the lines of separation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. “Anti-occupation movement: since 2012, Georgia lost 35 million sq m”, *Netgazeti*, 16 September 2020 (Georgian).

²⁹ Since 2012, more than 2,600 people have been detained and four killed near these lines. See “Anti-occupation movement: since 2012, Georgia lost 35 million sq m”, *op. cit.* Also see Amnesty International, “Behind Barbed Wire: The Human Rights Toll of ‘Borderisation’ in Georgia”, 3 July 2019; and “The Right to Non-Discrimination in Practice for Various Groups in Georgia”, Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center, 2020 (Georgian), pp. 85-89. The last is a joint report by eleven NGOs that describes other problems in the conflict zones, particularly for ethnic Georgians who often cannot collect pensions or salaries, suffer shortages of food and firewood, and lack access to medical assistance because of long-term closures of crossings beginning in 2019.

³⁰ “Statement of the Co-Chairs of the Geneva International Discussions”, OSCE, 6 November 2019; “EU special representative meets Georgia officials, says Tskhinvali crossing points need to be reopened”, *Civil.ge*, 21 January 2020; “An urgent call for action to end humanitarian crisis in Akhgori, Georgia”, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, 3 February 2020; “Reports: occupied Akhgori resident dies after denied transfer to Georgia proper”, *Civil.ge*, 15 October 2020.

Borderisation did bring the Russian and Georgian foreign ministers together in September 2019, when they met in an effort to defuse the first serious crisis since the 2008 war. The crisis first arose in late August 2019. After spotting South Ossetians preparing to build fencing, Tbilisi sought to discourage them by establishing a police outpost at the entrance of a village located on the Georgian side, close to the line of separation with the breakaway. In response, South Ossetia's de facto leadership assembled troops in the area and threatened to attack the Georgian police.³¹ But when the foreign ministers finally met – a month after the incident – they failed to reach agreement. Moreover, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov later rebuked his Georgian counterpart for speaking more to the Georgian media than he did at the meeting itself.³² A year later, the impasse remains unresolved. The Georgian police outpost is still in place and the de facto South Ossetian leadership periodically threatens to take it over.

The dead end that the government seems to have reached on security issues in direct talks with Russia combines with borderisation to exacerbate public and elite frustration with Tbilisi's policy toward Moscow. It is difficult, therefore, for Tbilisi to justify continuing along the normalisation track. Recent polls indicate that only 40 per cent of Georgians support dialogue with Russia, the lowest level in a decade and a sharp drop from the 83 per cent who backed it at the start of normalisation.³³ Popular frustration with the relationship came into stark view in June 2019, when a Russian legislator participating in an international conference at Georgia's parliament building addressed the attendees from the speaker's seat. Critics expressed outrage about the symbolism, leading to the largest protests in Georgia's capital since 2012. Protesters called for government resignations and reforms, and also voiced strong anti-Russian views. After some of them tried to break into the parliament building, authorities dispatched riot police. The hundreds of resulting injuries set off another scandal.³⁴

Compounding frustration among officials in Tbilisi is that new incidents at or near the lines of separation are sparking their own protests, and are proving a major distraction.³⁵ To keep angry protesters away from spots that have become flashpoints near the lines of separation, Georgian police have begun building temporary checkpoints.³⁶ "We've reached the point when the Georgian police have to protect Russian soldiers – isn't it insane?", asked a Georgian opposition politician.³⁷ Those in the opposition already inclined to view the Georgian Dream party as a "Russian plan" or project because of its efforts at rapprochement see these incidents as proof that the

³¹ For details of the crisis, see Tornike Zurabashvili, "Tsnelisi-Chorchana Crisis: Facts, Details and Chronology", Rondeli Foundation, 2019.

³² "Lavrov says Zalkaliani requested meeting", *Civil.ge*, 28 September 2019.

³³ "Public Opinion Survey - Residents of Georgia, June-July 2020", International Republican Institute, 12 August 2020, p. 57.

³⁴ On a more positive note, the scandal may have contributed to enactment of electoral reforms that will ease the entry of opposition voices into parliament. See "Georgia protests: thousands storm parliament over Russian MP's speech", *BBC*, 21 June 2019.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, official, Tbilisi, September 2020.

³⁶ The checkpoints are usually removed when protesters leave the area and/or tensions ease. Four leading Georgian NGOs have issued a joint statement asking the government to remove the checkpoints permanently. "Civil Organisations to the Government: Cease Limiting Access to Villages Near the Occupied Territories", *Georgian Young Lawyers' Association*, 29 July 2020 (Georgian).

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, politician, Tbilisi, August 2020.

party is doing Moscow's bidding.³⁸ This perception, of course, makes it much harder to pursue normalisation.³⁹

Georgian officials told Crisis Group that another dramatic development – be it a death at the lines of separation or new borderisation activities in a Georgian village – could create a public backlash that would force them to abandon normalisation.⁴⁰ Already, relations have cooled. While Abashidze and Karasin used to meet three to five times a year as part of the normalisation dialogue, they have not had a single in-person meeting since the start of 2020, although they occasionally speak on the telephone.⁴¹ Officially, the reason for this slowdown is the COVID-19 pandemic, but other meetings involving both Georgian and Russian officials have continued.

Meanwhile, there has been no direct air travel between Russia and Georgia in over a year, the result of a travel ban imposed by Moscow after the 2019 Tbilisi protests described above.⁴² It is possible, but not certain, that direct flights will resume after the countries lift border controls linked to the pandemic, which could offer a way for Russia to change this policy and send a positive signal regarding relations with Georgia. Indeed, Lavrov has spoken in support of resuming flights, but Georgian officials say they do not know what Russia plans to do.⁴³

IV. Does It Make Sense to Raise the Stakes?

Frustration with the status quo has emboldened critics of strategic patience and normalisation – many of whom are associated with the United National Movement (UNM), which led the government that Georgian Dream defeated in 2012 and remains the most prominent opposition party in Georgia.

UNM members argue that Georgian Dream and its founder Bidzina Ivanishvili are promoting Russian interests in the South Caucasus.⁴⁴ Among other things, they argue that dialogue with Moscow increases Georgia's economic dependence on Russia and that tactics like strategic patience and normalisation are "toothless", giving Moscow no incentive to withdraw its forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia and reverse its recognition of the breakaways' independence – the only outcome UNM sees as respecting Georgia's sovereignty.⁴⁵ They advocate more confrontational tactics. Since UNM believes that Moscow only understands the "language of pressure", has been weakened by its dispute over Ukraine with the West, and fears the opening of a "second front", it argues that Georgia needs to be able to threaten just that. UNM officials thus call for a "loud campaign" in Western countries to raise awareness of and demand responses to Russian actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, politicians, Tbilisi, August 2020.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, officials, politicians and analysts, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Georgian officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Georgian official, Tbilisi, September 2020.

⁴² "Putin's ban on direct Russia-Georgia flights comes into force", RFE/RL, 8 July 2019.

⁴³ See "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with *Trud* Newspaper", official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 August 2020. Crisis Group interviews, Georgian officials, Tbilisi, August and September 2020.

⁴⁴ For details, see the "Peace Policy" published on the UNM website (Georgian).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Crisis Group interviews, politicians, Tbilisi, August 2020.

Such a campaign, their argument goes, will lead Western states to threaten to impose real costs if Russia does not change its policies.⁴⁶

While some of UNM's premises are, as described below, questionable, continued borderisation and related actions have led politicians from other parties (including Georgian Dream) to at times echo its call for a tougher stance vis-à-vis Moscow.

For example, in 2018, figures across the Georgian political spectrum were frustrated by the government's inability to punish those in the de facto South Ossetia security offices responsible for the death of a Georgian citizen, Archil Tatumashvili. In late February 2018, Tatumashvili and two of his associates, all reportedly involved in trade between South Ossetia and Georgia proper, were detained by de facto officials. Hours later, Tatumashvili was reported dead at the detention centre.⁴⁷ Despite Tbilisi's demands, Tatumashvili's body remained in South Ossetia for a month before it was repatriated. The body, when recovered, showed signs of abuse.⁴⁸ This death was the third killing of an ethnic Georgian by low-level de facto officials, none of which has been fully investigated by either Abkhazia or South Ossetia.⁴⁹ An opposition party, European Georgia, called for the government to impose sanctions in response to what they characterised as a pattern of abuse of ethnic Georgians by the de facto governments, with Russian support.⁵⁰

The government did so, up to a point. It published a list of 33 candidates for bans on international travel and banking and sanctioned them. The list included individuals Tbilisi held responsible for Archil Tatumashvili's death, along with others believed by the Georgian government to be guilty of various crimes and human rights abuses against ethnic Georgians dating back to the early 1990s. Some on the list were reportedly deceased. All were residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁵¹ To the frustration of opposition leaders, however, the government did not sanction any Russian military or security officers.⁵²

The sanctions list received a measure of support in a number of European countries and EU institutions, as well as in the U.S. House of Representatives, which issued a bipartisan call to the White House urging it to take steps aligned with Georgia's proposed sanctions.⁵³ But opposition leaders saw the effort as a failure, arguing that

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, politician, Tbilisi, August 2020.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group Europe Report N°249, *Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Time to Talk Trade*, 24 May 2018, p. 9.

⁴⁸ "Georgian autopsy says Tatumashvili sustained over 100 injuries before dying", OC Media, 6 June 2018.

⁴⁹ The first of the other two cases occurred in 2014. David Basharuli, an ethnic Georgian teenager, was found dead soon after being detained by a representative of the de facto South Ossetian prosecutor's office. The second death took place in 2017, when Giga Otkhзорia, an internally displaced person, was shot dead by a low-level de facto Abkhazian official. This killing was captured on closed-circuit TV camera.

⁵⁰ For background on the list, see "Government unveils Tatumashvili-Otkhзорia list", Civil.ge, 27 June 2018.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See "Government of Georgia Decree No. 339", Parliament of Georgia, 26 June 2018; "Statement by European Georgia", Facebook, 19 May 2020.

⁵³ Lithuania introduced a travel ban for sanctioned people in August 2018. In June 2018, the European Parliament called on the member states and the EU Council to impose national and EU-wide sanctions on those in the list. The U.S. House of Representatives proposed similar restrictions in

the Georgian Dream-led government had not done enough to pressure Russia and promote Georgia's sanctions policy in the West.⁵⁴ An opposition politician told Crisis Group that Georgian Dream does the bare minimum and tries to pass it off as a real response: "They [Georgian Dream] want to have their cake and eat it, too, and keep lying to our partners and to all of us, telling us that everything is OK".⁵⁵

Still, Georgian hardliners appear to be operating from a set of assumptions about Western leaders and their appetite for aggravating already tense relations with Russia in support of Tbilisi's goals that seem somewhat detached from reality. There is no indication that Western leaders presently see much value in further straining relations with Moscow and, potentially, courting escalation in the South Caucasus. As one senior U.S. official put it, despite parallels between Georgia and Ukraine as "front-line partners" facing Russia, President Trump seems disinclined to support Georgia-related sanctions on Russia.⁵⁶ (That position could change under a future administration should former Vice President Joe Biden win the election.)

Expectations regarding a tougher EU line may also appear unrealistic, even to those who want it most. Member states from Eastern Europe and the Baltic region tend to be supportive of Tbilisi's efforts to elicit a tougher EU stance on Russia, rhetorically at least, but Tbilisi is less confident about the support of Western European countries, which they see as less vocal and more cautious.⁵⁷ As a result, even some Georgian hardliners realise that their prospects for success are weaker than their colleagues sometimes project. "I am a realist, and I do understand that there is not much appetite for this in 'old Europe'", said one UNM representative. "But if you do not push for your interest, no one will ever come and stand for you", that is to say, back you up.⁵⁸

Beyond the fact that the UNM's get-tough strategy seems built on faulty assumptions, there would be another downside to ending bilateral talks: it could reverse the real progress of the last eight years. Thanks largely to normalisation, Russia is now Georgia's second largest trading partner.⁵⁹ Neither the travel ban nor the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which have hit Georgia's economy and its all-important tourism industry hard, has reduced Russia's ranking, although the volume of commerce has dropped somewhat.⁶⁰

the Georgia Support Act adopted in October 2019. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) supported the Georgian list in its resolution on Sergey Magnitsky in January 2019.⁵⁴ See "Statement by European Georgia", Facebook, 19 May 2020. Crisis Group interviews, politicians, Tbilisi, August 2020.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, politician, Tbilisi, August 2020.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, March 2020.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, EU official, Georgian officials and politicians, Tbilisi, February, August and September 2020. EU officials broadly concurred that Western European policies would not become tougher on Russia if Georgia abandoned normalisation. Crisis Group interviews, Brussels, 22 October 2020.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, politician, Tbilisi, August 2020.

⁵⁹ "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Trends and Threats", Transparency International Georgia, 4 May 2020.

⁶⁰ According to a senior Georgian official, trade with Russia went down by 15-17 per cent, "which is much less than what we expected". Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, September 2020. PMCG Research figures indicate a sharp decrease in tourism after the Russian ban on flights in 2019 and the onset of COVID-19 in 2020. See its "Monthly Tourism Updates" for September 2019 and July 2020.

While critics would argue that these trends compromise Georgia's national security by fostering dependence on Russia, a halt to normalisation could do more direct harm to security and stability, notably by increasing risks of escalation along the lines of separation. Normalisation dialogues, although not formally intended for this purpose, have served as a quiet channel of communication to dampen tensions in several cases. While they cannot take the place of the Geneva formats, they provide a complement that can help lay the groundwork for more effective talks in Geneva and through the IPRM. In 2013, for instance, Tbilisi's complaints through this channel led Russian and de facto South Ossetian border guards to switch from barbed wire to chain-link fences in some populated areas.⁶¹ In the 2018 incident described above, they led to the repatriation of Tatumashvili's remains.⁶² In late 2019, de facto authorities freed a Georgian doctor, arrested after he had crossed the line of separation to urgently assist his South Ossetian patient.⁶³

Moreover, deteriorating relations between Tbilisi and Moscow could also undermine prospects for cooperation between Georgia and the de facto authorities. "Since the 1990s, every time Tbilisi and Moscow were at odds, the echo of their problems reached Sukhumi [Abkhazia's self-proclaimed capital] and Tskhinvali", said a former Georgian diplomat.⁶⁴ An end to normalisation would likely mean that renewed visits by residents of the breakaway regions to Georgian-controlled territory would again dwindle, if not cease, with deleterious effects upon health, pocketbooks and quality of life.

By contrast, with normalisation in place, relations with Abkhazia, at a minimum, could improve. Today, as noted above, Sukhumi says it is prepared to talk trade with Georgia regardless of the state of Georgian-Russian relations.⁶⁵ Abkhazia needs re-invigorated trade with Tbilisi to compensate for the continued decline in Russian financial support, made more acute by the pandemic. Since the summer of 2020, Abkhazia has had trouble paying salaries and pensions and reports regular shortages of cash.⁶⁶

South Ossetia has similar problems, although with a population seven times smaller (around 30,000 people as compared to more than 200,000 in Abkhazia), it could more easily tend to its needs with resources provided by Russia. Accordingly, the South Ossetian leadership prefers to wait for a possible Russian cash injection rather than talk to Tbilisi, even in the face of COVID-19.⁶⁷

⁶¹ "South Ossetian KGB: only chain-link fences will be installed at the border with Georgia", Caucasus Knot, 1 December 2013 (Russian).

⁶² "Zurab Abashidze focused on death of Archil Tatumashvili and Giga Otkhozoria during meeting with Gregoriy Karasin", 1TV Georgia, 25 May 2018.

⁶³ "Zurab Abashidze - I hope we will get an answer to Vazha Gaprashvili's case in Geneva", 1TV Georgia, 9 December 2019.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, former official, Tbilisi, August 2020.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, de facto representatives, Sukhumi, August 2020.

⁶⁶ Inal Khashig, "Difficult times ahead for economy of Abkhazia", JAM News, 25 June 2020.

⁶⁷ See Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°89, *The COVID-19 Challenge in Post-Soviet Breakaway States*, 7 May 2020, p. 12-15.

V. Another Way Forward

With normalisation increasingly under strain, and a harder line fraught with problems, Georgia seems to have few good Russia policy options. In an effort to break out of the “engagement vs. confrontation” dichotomy, Georgians from across the political spectrum have begun to consider a different approach – one that does not jettison normalisation, maintains Georgia’s core positions on sovereignty and could enable Tbilisi to take the initiative in shaping its relations with both breakaway regions, particularly Abkhazia, which seems keener than South Ossetia on forging ties. The core of the proposed new policy would be to proactively identify areas where Georgia could cooperate with both Russia and the breakaways. Indeed, normalisation – which thus far has excluded discussion of breakaway-related issues – could expand to include conversations about Georgian relations with these entities. Proponents of this approach include both Georgian Dream members who fear for the future of normalisation, absent an effort to reinvigorate it, and opposition activists who worry that more pressure on Russia will backfire.

The proposed new policy reflects an effort to learn from past failures. One reason Georgian Dream was unable to have a successful security dialogue with Moscow, said a former senior official, is that it sought “something big”.⁶⁸ Instead, what it got in the Geneva format was repetitive, fruitless discussions of familiar topics.⁶⁹ As discussed above, the assurances Georgia wants from Russia – access for the EU Monitoring Mission and a commitment to the non-use of force – do not appeal to Moscow, and Tbilisi has little to offer by way of inducements. “The meeting will be very short, if Georgia offers only these two topics for discussion”, a Russian analyst with ties to the Kremlin told Crisis Group⁷⁰

Thus, in addition to allowing for discussions of the breakaways under the existing normalisation dialogue, Moscow and Tbilisi could add borderisation as a general topic to their agenda for Geneva talks. Doing so would not obviate the IPRM formats, which would remain in place for discussions of specific incidents. But it would treat borderisation as a broader problem affecting Russia and Georgia, as well as the breakaways.

The question is whether Moscow would be amenable to this approach. While Tbilisi wants to hold Moscow accountable, the latter disingenuously insists that Tbilisi’s quarrel is only with the breakaway regions. No one contests the fact that Russian soldiers are in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, enforcing borderisation.⁷¹ Dispatched there under Moscow’s treaties with the de facto authorities, they, even more than their de facto counterparts, are the ones trying to stop villagers who are walking around newly built fences to reach the fields and markets that have made up their livelihoods for decades.⁷² Active-duty Russian military personnel are fortifying these out-

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, former official, Tbilisi, August 2020.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, analyst, Moscow, March 2020.

⁷¹ “Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on joint efforts in protection of the state border of the Republic of Abkhazia” and “Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on joint efforts in protection of the state border of the Republic of South Ossetia”, official website of the President of Russia, 30 April 2009 (Russian).

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, analysts and officials, Moscow and Tbilisi, March and August 2020.

posts with more barbed wire and watchtowers, and still failing to prevent the movement that is critical to the villages thus divided. “At some point, they will start building walls”, one Russian expert with official ties warned.⁷³

Borderisation may have some downsides for Russia, too. In the event of escalation, both Georgia and Western states are likely to view Russia as responsible, with Russia facing additional opprobrium and Russia-West relations worsening further. Russian officials have told Crisis Group that they recognise these dangers.⁷⁴

If the parties agree to put borderisation on the table, they might usefully focus on a proposal put forward in December 2019 by Geneva mediators, who recommended establishing a number of demilitarised zones along the South Ossetian line of separation.⁷⁵ Tbilisi, Moscow and Tskhinvali could all pull back their troops, border guards and police, and establish a special regime on territory where they agree to disagree about just where the line of separation lies. The idea remains on the table, although its technical provisions and specifics remain to be fleshed out.

Continued and broadened normalisation, meanwhile, would also improve prospects for trade talks between Tbilisi and de facto authorities in Abkhazia. With the Kremlin under pressure to spend more at home, the trend that began in 2014 of investing less in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is likely to endure.⁷⁶ While South Ossetia presently is not interested in trade with Tbilisi, Abkhazia’s economy could get a boost from such ties, potentially leaving Moscow with a lesser burden. If Russia could do so without changing its overall position on the statelet’s independence, it could reap a financial benefit without losing significant political ground.⁷⁷

Tbilisi might well be amenable: it proposed something similar in 2018 with its “A Step to a Better Future” scheme, which would have eased trade and recognised university diplomas issued by the de facto authorities. Sukhumi nixed the scheme at the time as offering the breakaway region too little. Today, with a new Abkhazian government more amenable to ties with Georgia, some of the plan’s elements could be the starting point for new talks with the de facto authorities.⁷⁸ Increased contacts with Abkhazia could boost Tbilisi’s leverage on other issues, including the government’s main goals: to free up travel across the line of separation and improve conditions for ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia.

To make any of these ideas feasible, Tbilisi and Moscow will need to talk more often and be willing to discuss these issues. One Russian diplomat calculated that Georgian and Russian officials spend only two days per year in negotiation with one another, despite all the available formats. “How do you expect us to come up with smart ideas if we do not really speak to each other?”, the diplomat asked.⁷⁹ Russian officials generally propose meetings on topics tangential to Abkhazia and South Ossetia: ecology, humanitarian cooperation and cultural exchange, in line with normalisation as initially conceived.⁸⁰ The breakaway regions are not necessarily off the table, but putting

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, analyst, Moscow, March 2020.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, officials, Moscow, March 2020.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, diplomat and officials, Tbilisi, February, July and August 2020.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Moscow, March and September 2020.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, officials, Moscow, March 2020.

⁷⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Time to Talk Trade*, op. cit.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, official, Moscow, March 2020.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, official, Tbilisi, September 2020.

them on it would require a conscious policy decision. As a Russian official told Crisis Group, “One cannot expect a bureaucracy to diverge from a standing policy line rapidly and on its own initiative, without direction from above”.⁸¹

Moscow has indicated that it does not want to lose normalisation. Even in announcing its 2019 air traffic embargo, the Russian foreign ministry underlined its desire to maintain direct contacts with Tbilisi.⁸² That Grigory Karasin, now a senator, remained in his role as negotiator after retiring from the foreign ministry also indicates Moscow’s desire to keep dialogue going. “If the Russians wanted to end the process, they had so many good excuses”, a senior Georgian official said.⁸³

Moscow has never expected normalisation to lead to a change in Tbilisi’s basic positions on Abkhazia or South Ossetia, or to alignment of Georgia’s foreign policy with Russia’s.⁸⁴ To the contrary, normalisation, aside from its direct benefits and its role in stabilisation, allows Moscow to point to a neighbouring country that, despite war and territorial disputes, has agreed to maintain a relationship. Moscow finds the Georgian example particularly useful in light of its rancorous relationship with Kyiv, to show Ukrainians, Westerners and the world that another model is possible.⁸⁵ Whether or not that means they might be willing to adapt and extend the normalisation format is unclear, but there would be good reason for Moscow to agree. Just like Tbilisi did eight years ago when it launched the dialogue, Georgia’s new government, once in place, should reach out to Moscow to explore whether the time is ripe for an update to the normalisation format – and an honest conversation about borderisation in Geneva.

VI. Conclusion

Whoever takes office in Tbilisi in the wake of October’s election will assume responsibility for ensuring Georgia’s security and prosperity. Normalisation, while imperfect, has helped facilitate both since 2012. Without it, both Georgia and Russia would be worse off. But the policy cannot survive if it is not adapted to allow Tbilisi and Moscow to talk frankly about the breakaways, and if the Geneva process in which the two discuss security issues does not take on the increasing challenge of borderisation. This broadening of both dialogues could improve security, enable Russia and Georgia to maintain bilateral trade, and ease prospects for exchanges between Georgia and Abkhazia, to the benefit of all.

Tbilisi/Moscow/Brussels, 27 October 2020

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, official, Moscow, March 2020.

⁸² “Response of the State Secretary and Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia Grigory Karasin to RIA Novosti”, official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 June 2019.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, official, Tbilisi, September 2020.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Moscow, March 2020.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Moscow, March and September 2020.

Appendix A: Map of Georgia with Breakaway Regions



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

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Patriotic Mobilisation in Russia, Europe Report N°251, 4 July 2018.

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Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters, Europe Report N°257, 30 April 2020 (also available in Arabic and Turkish).

Calibrating the Response: Turkey's ISIS Returnees, Europe Report N°258, 29 June 2020 (also available in Turkish).

Central Asia

Uzbekistan: The Hundred Days, Europe and Central Asia Report N°242, 15 March 2017.

Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries, Europe and Central Asia Report N°245, 27 July 2017 (also available in Chinese and Russian).

The Rising Risks of Misrule in Tajikistan, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°86, 9 October 2017 (also available in Russian).

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