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How to Get a Georgia-Russia Dialogue

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The continuing confrontation between Georgia and Russia is one of the most serious problems of European security. Without a settlement, there is a permanent risk of return to war, either by accident or by design. A failure to resolve the conflict leaves Georgia hosting one of the largest populations of internally displaced persons in Europe. The ongoing trade embargo is crippling Georgia's economy. The deepening isolation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia strengthens their dependence on Russia. The unresolved conflict makes it very difficult for the EU to agree a strategy towards the Russian Federation. It complicates the further development of Russia's relations with the United States. Further rapprochement is desirable, given the central role of Russia in dealing with key issues of international relations, including Iran, non-proliferation and strategic weapons control. The confrontation, finally, makes it difficult to achieve progress in the effort to renew Europe's security architecture.

Obstacles to Dialogue

The encouragement of dialogue between Georgia and Russia is the flavour of the month among NGOs and concerned governments. If some accommodation were achieved, these problems would go away. Multiple tentative efforts are emerging in the UK and the rest of the EU, in the United States, and in Russia itself. These efforts are welcome. The question is how to get such a dialogue going in current conditions.

A serious official dialogue appears to be impossible at the moment. From a Georgian perspective, it is unpalatable and possibly politically suicidal to open, without conditions, a conversation with a state that invaded and partially dismembered the country, is occupying a sizeable chunk of Georgian territory, has failed to implement fully the cease-fire agreement it signed, and has recognized the bits sliced off as sovereign states. To encourage Georgia down this track is to reward aggression. The West cannot ask Georgia to crawl to the table.

There are also serious technical obstacles. Who should be at the table? From a Georgian perspective, this is a quarrel with Russia, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia are part of Georgia's domestic jurisdiction. From an Abkhaz and South Ossetian perspective, this is their quarrel with Georgia and it would be unreasonable to discuss their fate without having them in the conversation. Russia would agree; after all, the two enclaves have been recognized by Russia, and Russia is now bound to them by numerous bilateral agreements.

In such conditions, informal dialogue involving academics, civil society and political figures on both sides is a possible attractive alternative. This dialogue might focus on the potential for cooperation in areas unrelated to the conflict itself (for example, in transport, energy, and migration). If consensus were possible at this informal level, and if it were embraced by the two governments, then momentum towards serious conversation of central issues might emerge.

However, for this process to be effective, the participants would have to be respected and representative mainstream figures. This level of participation can be delivered on the Russian side. But in Georgia it would be difficult to find mainstream figures who would participate without the tacit or explicit approval of their government. Without that approval, and to some extent even with it, participation would carry considerable political and personal risks for those involved. Without these people, the 'dialogue' would amount to idle chatter.

Concessions

One way to move forward in this context might be to broaden the focus of discussion beyond the bilateral Russian-Georgian frame and towards a region-wide discussion on the Caucasus as a whole. The potential advantage here is that it would dilute the intensity of the dispute between Georgia and Russia. The risk is that it would add in a number of other seemingly intractable problems, not least that of Nagorno-Karabakh or, for that matter, issues of self-determination in the North Caucasus.

At the end of the day, the best way forward would be for the Russians to show some flexibility. They won. They could show magnanimity in their victory. They can do so without jeopardizing the significant gains they drew from the war. NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine is off the agenda for the foreseeable future. NATO's eastward enlargement has stopped. Russia has successfully made the point that its security concerns cannot be ignored as the structure of European security evolves. Both the US and the EU are seeking a mutually beneficial rapprochement with Russia.

Russian concessions might include agreement on full implementation of the EU-mediated cease-fire arrangement that Russia signed and is now violating. That would imply minor withdrawals of Russian forces that remain outside South Ossetia itself, as occurred at Perevi in mid-October. Russia might also allow the EU Monitoring Mission to operate on both sides of the line of

contact. And, finally, they might reduce the numbers of Russian forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia towards pre-war levels.

These steps would have no effect on Russia's strategic gains nor would they contravene agreements with the two breakaway regions. If implemented carefully, they could facilitate achievement of Russia's larger agenda in relations with the US, NATO and the EU.

There is of course a risk that concessions of this type would be claimed as victories by the current Georgian government. But so what? If that is the price of moving forward towards normalization, then it is worth paying. It is also possible that the lesson Georgia would draw from Russian flexibility would be that intransigence works. We do not know that, but it would be useful to find out.

Conclusion

There is at the moment very little prospect for productive dialogue between Russia and Georgia. Russia holds most of the cards. If Russians want a productive conversation, then some combination of these steps might generate one. If they are not interested in a serious conversation, then it is pointless for third parties to try to arrange one.

In this context, perhaps it is wrong to focus on Georgia-Russia dialogue with the Abkhaz and Ossets as add-ons. Perhaps it would be more effective to promote Georgian dialogue with the Abkhaz and the Ossets, possibly with Russia as an add-on. Georgia has far greater leverage in conversations of this type, because it is the gatekeeper to international public and private engagement with the two breakaway states. To the extent that the Ossets, and particularly the Abkhaz, worry about dependence on the Russian Federation, they have an incentive to open that gate.