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# Georgia on the Brink

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## PERSPECTIVE

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# Georgia on the Brink

By Thomas Goltz

Pressure from Without

The Georgian republic, the successor to an ancient society and culture that converted to Christianity six centuries before Russia, finds itself in a precarious state. Beset by serious economic problems, it is subject to attempts by Russia to apply pressure, including sanctions that often look like embargoes, to bend it to Moscow's will.

The punishment seems to be meted out due to Georgian resistance to Moscow's demand concerning the renewal of leases for four Russian military bases, which remain on Georgian soil despite an endless series of negotiations (including international requests) to remove them. Specifically, Russia has insisted on retaining partial control of the Vaziani military airport and full control of the Gudauta base, which would be run by Russian "peacekeeping" troops in Abkhazia - peacekeepers, it might be added, who took an active role in routing Georgian forces from Georgia's province of Abkhazia during the brutal war of 1992-93. Russia also is demanding a 15-year lease on the two largest bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki.

All this might be regarded as so much smoke and mirrors, given the fact that three of the four bases in question are in areas that, as a result of Russian intervention, now are beyond the writ of Georgia's government - Batumi in the "Autonomous Republic of Adjara," Akhalkalaki in the all-but-autonomous Armenian region of Javakheti, and Gudauta, of course, in the "Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia" that, with Russia's help, was "ethnically cleansed" of Georgians during the war. As for Vaziani, close to Tbilisi, observers of the Caucasus privately worry that its "transfer" by the Russians might well serve as a pretext for arming plotters of an anti-Shevardnadze coup d'etat (along the

lines of the infamous closure of the Ganje base in neighboring Azerbaijan, in 1993, that led to the ouster of the late Abulfaz Elchibey when the arms to be transferred fell into the "wrong hands").

Another stick wielded against the Shevardnadze government is the pending implementation of a new visa regime for Georgian citizens wishing to enter (and work in some capacity) in Russia. By some estimates, this economic dependency might involve over 850,000 Georgians - or nearly one-sixth of the population of Georgia (and a group that includes a number of individuals associated with the periodic assassination attempts against Shevardnadze). Interestingly, the new visa regime applies only to the purely "Georgian" parts of the country, with residents of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia being exempted - in effect declaring these regions de facto chunks of the Russian Federation.

Another Russian-initiated problem concerns the so-called Pankisi Gorge - abutting on Russian Dagestan, but close enough to war-ravaged Chechnya to have become a haven for over-the-mountain refugees as well as native, ethnic-Chechen criminal gangs - that has slipped away from whatever control Tbilisi once exerted. Russia's first deputy chief of the armed forces, Col.-Gen. Valery Manilov, has repeatedly "offered" Georgia "assistance" in dealing with the (allegedly) Chechen forces destabilizing the country, and has stated that Russia would be happy to intervene with troops provided "an invitation, a request, or an appeal for help" was received. A war- and disaster-weary Georgian journalist friend of mine, who was obliged to enter the gorge during a kidnapping crisis, seemed disinclined to resist.

This is, of course, precisely the attitude that Russia would like to engender in Georgia, and the role it played in tsarist times as well as during the collapse of the short-lived Menshevik (and anti-Bolshevik) government of Noe Jordania in the years 1918-21: Exhaust the Georgians into acquiescence, by forcing them to ask themselves whether continued adversity is worth the price of continued independence.

## Internal Pressures

Despite massive international aid (Georgia is now the third highest recipient of US aid after Israel and Armenia in per capita terms), the flourishing of an NGO-based economy based on Tbilisi's "hinge" position between mutually inimical Armenia and Azerbaijan and transit revenue from the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline (and the promise of even greater revenues if and when the larger Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan line gets built), the basic outlines of Disasterland Georgia remain the same today, in 2001, as during a previous visit seven years ago. Even the continued prestige lent the country of five million by the leadership of former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze has not helped. A beautiful land inhabited by gregarious folk, perhaps given to just a tad too much individualism and disrespect for anyone's law but their own, is still wracked by several simmering ethnic conflicts, a sustained and psychologically debilitating energy crisis and insidious corruption, as insiders admit.

Indeed, just how Georgia manages to exist remains one of the great mysteries of the Caucasus.

Much has been made of the chronic gas and electricity shortages this winter, the most celebrated of which occurred when the Russians switched off the tap on New Year's Eve, allegedly in response to Georgia's failure to pay a debt of nearly \$180 million, a shortcoming for which the American AES company is blamed.

According to Michael Scholey, the director of AES, the Russian company that supplies gas for Georgia's main electric power generators, Inertgazstroi, cut off supplies in early December, claiming that AES wasn't paying enough for the gas that fires the generators. AES negotiated an emergency increase in payments, but on New Year's Day supplies were cut again, this time allegedly on the orders of the Kremlin. Once again AES was obliged to grovel for someone to turn the tap back on, but not before street demonstrations in downtown Tbilisi (and elsewhere) served as a reminder just how dependent the country remains on Russia.

"For some reason everything is our fault," chuckled Scholey. "Blame the foreigners and put pressure on the guys with the big checkbooks. [But] It's much more complex than that. We have been attacking a lot of vested interest groups and largely have the people on our side... the demonstrations about lack of power were against the government, not us, and were more an outburst against corruption and incompetence.... Add to that the recent Russian dimension and you can see the fun and games we are having."

"We are up against the gun, and receive virtually no support from Georgia's alleged international friends to get over crisis after crisis," said Scholey, the most public foreigner in Georgia these days, who is stopped in the street to be praised or harassed, depending on whether his interlocutor has paid his or her metered electric bill. That controversial project (controversial because Georgians, like most other post-Soviet citizens, still are accustomed to receiving their gas, electricity and water for free, or at least not having their utilities turned off for non-payment) was part of a \$45 million refurbishment of the electrical consumer grid, and only a part of AES's \$224 million investment in Georgia.

"Had it not been for the AES investments, the Georgian energy sector would have collapsed completely," President Shevardnadze said in a recent radio address.

Other members of the government are more oblique in their praise. One deputy minister known by Scholey - and whom he declined to name - has been heating his swimming pool with a personal transformer, and has yet to pay a bill due to insider connections. Of course, using (or abusing) one's position in government to enjoy unsanctioned perks is hardly unique to Georgia.

Clearly, there is plenty of adversity in daily life in Tbilisi to be endured, the most obvious manifestation being energy. Even when Michael Scholey and AES can provide power, there is not always much relief. Various parts of the city blink on and off as if mischievous elves were playing with the switches of the power grid, leaving persons stranded in elevators and cutting off facsimile transmissions mid-page. When the lights

go back on - often in the middle of the night - radios blare and small floods of precious water gush in apartments where absent owners have forgotten to turn off the bathroom and kitchen spigots. The Tbilisi metro is frequently out of service, forcing those who actually go to work to walk or try to flag down cars driven by people who are not afraid of car-jackings. Gasoline is of poor quality (even if it is cheaper than in oil-producing Azerbaijan because it has been smuggled in at cut rates), while car repair is almost impossible due to a general lack of spare parts, unless you are a minister or mafioso (or son or daughter thereof) driving a Jeep Cherokee up to the Gudauri ski resort to get away from it all.

And that is the all-too-evident interplay between flagrant local corruption and flagrant freezing, induced by Moscow's gas games. With several months of winter weather remaining, the growing contradiction between Georgia's moneyed elite and the impoverished many will no doubt grow even more acute.

"Protiv Loma Nyet Priomna," say the Russians - a phrase loosely if accurately translated as "there is no shield against a crowbar." The gas games are just one of several blunt methods now employed against Georgia, in order to have the Black Sea state either acquiesce to renewed domination by Vladimir Putin's quasi-resurrected rump Soviet Union (in the guise of the Russian-dominated Commonwealth Independent States), or face internal collapse.

Indeed, Putin's attitude toward Shevardnadze's republic might be summed up by General Alexei Yermolov, who conquered the Caucasus in the 19th century. Explaining how he intended to deal with the anti-tsarist peasant revolt in Guria (western Georgia) shortly after Russia's annexation of the independence-minded country, Yermolov said: "Extreme poverty will be their punishment."

The adversity of life in Tbilisi is thrown into sharp relief by the hijinks of the new-moneyed elite. Seven years ago, I had occasion to write of "the guys and gals on the slopes of the Gudauri resort in northern Georgia... dressed in their spandex jumpers

and gore-tex parkas, they preen at the midway station in anticipation of a playful après ski evening in the Marco Polo Club's disco and restaurant complex below, oblivious to conditions in the distant capital, Tbilisi, that seems literally light years away.... 'I come up every weekend to escape from Tbilisi,' said a young boogie board enthusiast named Irakli Toradze, who explained that he had an interest in 'construction.' 'It is in our nature to try and enjoy life, even in the face of adversity.'" Not much has changed.

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