

Back on its Feet

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TBILISI—For the Republic of Georgia, a new era is dawning. Some three years after the “Rose Revolution,” Tbilisi is on the verge of real independence from Russia—and true integration with the West. But whether these trends continue largely depends on what transpires in the restive regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Not long after the disintegration of the USSR and Georgia’s formal declaration of independence in April 1991, the country became embroiled in military conflicts with Abkhaz and South Ossetian forces. Yet, even though both regions were supported by Russia, these clashes were seen internationally as ethnic conflicts—a perception that served to diminish Western concern for Georgia’s plight and deepen Tbilisi’s isolation. Without international backing, it did not take long for the fledgling Georgian armed forces (at that point more akin to paramilitary units than a trained military) to collapse.

The results were devastating. The nascent Georgian government lost control of both conflict zones, and hundreds of thousands suffered. In Abkhazia alone, approximately 300,000 Georgians loyal to the central government were banished, and ten thousand were killed outright. Just as significantly, Georgia was no longer able to resist Russian political pressure, and acquiesced to membership in the Russia-supported Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), at the time seen as the framework for a reconstituted Russian empire to replace the USSR. In turn, Russian military forces were deployed to Abkhazia and South Ossetia under CIS mandate, ostensibly as peacekeepers. The deployment—coupled with the ongoing presence of Russian military bases in Georgia (whose withdrawal became linked to a settlement of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts)—provided an unmistakable impression: Georgia had lost independence to Moscow once more.

In the years that followed, the ramifications of Georgia’s geopolitical quandary became apparent. Some observers argued that Russia would play a constructive role in their country, since it had legitimate interests in making sure that neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia stimulated movement toward independence in its own North Caucasus republics. Others, however, believed Georgia had nothing in common with Russia, and perceived themselves (like Russia’s Caucasus republics) to be suffering under aggression from Moscow.

The past decade has only served to validate the latter view. Georgian refugees remain displaced from their lands, and any attempts to remind the Russian government of its “peacekeeping” obligations results in new pressure. In 1998, for example, the Georgian government refused for a time to extend the mandate for Russia’s peacekeeping contingent—only to witness the expulsion of the remaining pro-Georgian population of Abkhazia. By and by, it has also become evident that, separated from Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have drifted



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into Moscow's geopolitical orbit—a reorientation that has included support for Russia's war in Chechnya.

Nevertheless, the past decade also saw a number of positive developments. Ten relatively peaceful years have enabled Georgia to strengthen its links with the West. Tbilisi has gained a better understanding of Western-style governance. The United States and Europe, meanwhile, have deepened their interest in the energy resources of the Caspian, and projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline have given Georgia and the South Caucasus a measure of energy independence.

Georgia's cooperation with the West has also deepened on another front. Through its participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, Georgia has begun a gradual transformation of its armed forces. Border security has improved as well, thanks to the U.S.-funded Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) started in 2002. Tbilisi is even on track for NATO integration pursuant to its 2004 Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with the Atlantic Alliance.

This transformation has profoundly changed the country's approaches to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. From an initial reliance on Russia, Georgian officials have become convinced that settlement of both situations is only possible through cooperation with the West. As a result, Tbilisi has hardened its attitudes toward Moscow, and has begun pressing for the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Georgia pursuant to the 1999 OSCE Istanbul declaration, with some success. Under the latest agreement drawn up with Moscow, Russian military forces are slated to leave Georgia completely in 2008. The next to go will be Russian peacekeepers; pursuant to the latest decision of the Georgian parliament, Russian peacekeeping forces will be replaced with international peacekeeping troops in the near future.

The stakes are high. If realized, these steps could mean the end of the Russian era in the South Caucasus. The only thing capable of stopping this process is a new outbreak of violence in Georgia's regions, which will provide the pretext for Russia to retain its military and peacekeeping forces in the country. Tbilisi and its Western partners, therefore, should carefully monitor this process, lest Moscow and Kremlin-supported forces find a reason to maintain their foothold.

