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The Collapse of Russian-Georgian Relations

This week, Russia's state gas company, Gazprom, declared its intent to charge Russia's southern neighbor, Georgia, a price for gas similar to what it charges its European Union customers—$230 per thousand cubic meters, twice what Georgia currently pays and the highest price in the post-Soviet region. Politically motivated, the price hike was to be expected, given the accelerated pace at which Russian-Georgian relations have deteriorated in recent weeks.

These latest developments began at the start of October with Georgia arresting four Russian military intelligence officers, threatening them with imprisonment on charges of espionage, and surrounding Russian military headquarters with police troops. After Georgia returned the officers, Russia escalated tensions to a new level by deporting some 700 Georgian migrant workers; encouraging police, tax inspectors, and right-wing nationalists to harass citizens and legal residents of Georgian origin; and imposing a land, sea, and postal embargo on Georgia. On the global scale, it was hardly a crisis, but it certainly looked like the start of one.

The road to crisis is being paved by the behavior of both Russia and Georgia. Despite their enormous disparities in power and perceived global roles, Moscow and Tbilisi refuse to play by common rules of the game, and outside actors appear impotent to get them to do so.

For its part, Russia does not want to resolve its longstanding territorial conflicts with Georgia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia or permit it to adopt a pro-Western course that could culminate in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership. It views politics in its immediate neighborhood as a purely geopolitical game in which outside powers (chiefly the United States) seek power and influence at Russia's expense. Moscow views Georgia as being the trigger in a reverse domino theory—Georgia is "falling," and this has the capacity to send shockwaves throughout the rest of the post-Soviet region. Russian policy is to avoid this from happening—most notably, by keeping Georgia fragmented until it surrenders or agrees to amputate its own limbs.

Moreover, Russia has perceived itself to be regaining stature in its neighborhood recently. A shift of the internal power balance in Ukraine has led to improved Russian-Ukrainian relations and a delay in Ukraine's own push for NATO membership. Russia sees the looming possibility of Kosovo's independence as a stamp of legitimacy for a second wave of independence among unrecognized postcommunist territories, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Meanwhile, European states and the United States continue to affirm Russia's eminent position internationally by virtue of its energy and nuclear power and diplomatic weight in addressing global offenders, Iran and North Korea. All

▪ *continued on page 2*

Upcoming Strategy Hour

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50th Anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution

21 November 2006
3CR – 9:00am

Featured speakers:

Ilona Teleki, Deputy Director, New European Democracies Program, Fellow, Europe Program ▪

Adrienn Petrovics, Research Intern, New European Democracies Program ▪

The Collapse of Russian-Georgian Relations

▪ *continued from page 1*

this has made for an ever firmer policy of consolidating control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This could easily go down a "Northern Cyprus" path—Russian recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence and the placement of more than just Russian peacekeeping boots on the ground.

Georgia, meanwhile, is a small country in a rush. President Mikheil Saakashvili's government is highly ambitious. Though Georgia does not seek immediate satisfaction of its goal of restoring territorial integrity, it wants to see at least something for its efforts, not further creeping annexation by Russia.

Georgian insecurity is also on the rise. At a minimum, Georgia fears that a new reality of Russian annexation is being put into place in the conflict zones which will be impossible to reverse. The authorities have also begun to express the belief that Russia is not only seeking to prevent the return of Georgia's territories but is directly implementing a policy of regime change, having had enough of Georgia's pro-Western policy and what it views as Georgian impertinence toward a former master.

Finally, Georgia does not entirely trust its Western friends to come to its aid. Georgia recognizes that the Europeans and the United States have nuanced relations with Russia, and that one of their underlying objectives is to keep Russian-Georgian relations smooth so that no new crises emerge that require handling or can interfere with "big picture" issues like Iran, North Korea, and others.

Rather than wait patiently and seek more gradual means for improving its position, Georgia is trying to keep its concerns from being pushed to the back burner of international politics. Authorities have tried to insist to the Russians and to separatist leaders that Georgia is a force to be dealt with, not steamrolled. It has built up the country's military forces while taking measures to build a stronger, and economically more welcoming, state. It has also unveiled "road maps" for the settlement of conflicts and seeks to internationalize the conflict-resolution formats so that Russia, an obvious party to conflict, will no longer be the dominant armed force in the breakaway regions.

Most controversially, Georgia has not shied away from encouraging cases like the spy scandal, in the belief that where there is fire—to which Moscow eagerly adds more fuel—a hesitant but sympathetic West will have no other choice but to put it out. It is a risky strategy, and one that has paid few dividends to date. But unless Western states are able to intervene more meaningfully to address the causes of the Russian-Georgian row, we can expect Moscow and Tbilisi to continue playing by rules that make sense only to themselves.

▪ ***Cory Welt, Deputy Director and Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Program, led a Strategy Hour session on October 26, 2006, discussing the current political turmoil between Russia and Georgia.***