
Will The Vector Of Russian-Georgian Relations Change?

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It is unlikely that after the election President Mikheil Saakashvili has changed his position on Georgian-Russian relations. For the time being, the statements about his wish to normalize those relations cannot be taken seriously. Rhetoric and emotions cannot lay the groundwork for relations, so far we lack the groundwork.

Should I remind you how President Saakashvili behaved after the elections in 2004? The situation was the same. Saakashvili proposed that Georgia and Russian should be on friendly terms with each other, thanked Russia for its sound and sober position on the "Rose Revolution" and the situation in Adjara. Some Russian mass media held Saakashvili up as an example of the fighter against corruption. One could say that there was a kind of "honeymoon" in the relations between the two countries.

But as we know, the "honeymoon" didn't last long. The crisis in South Ossetia occurred and tough statements about Abkhazia and South Ossetia were made. So, all the statements about friendship should be backed by actions. How can the Russian-Georgian relations improve in addressing the issue of South Ossetia and Abkhazia? NATO question is also left open, in particular, as the Georgian population, one can say, voted for NATO membership at the referendum on January 5.

It should be understood that Saakashvili is a pragmatic policy-maker.

True, the Russians' opinion about him is totally different, and they are wrong. Should Russia make substantial concessions to Georgia on the South Ossetian and Abkhazian issues, Saakashvili could even become a pro-Russian politician. In the 1990s some Russian generals took a more pro-Georgian stand than the local military did.

It is another matter that the Abkhazian and South Ossetian issues will have repercussions for the whole Caucasus. Therefore Russia cannot afford to make serious concessions. Russia may moderate its position partially and act as an arbiter in the conflict settlements.

But it cannot change its position drastically.

So, in the sphere of frozen conflicts there is no ground for relations improvement. But there is such a ground in other fields - economy, transport, education, etc.

As regards the mitigation of Saakashvili's rhetoric with respect to the opposition, it comes quite logical. The presidential election showed that the opposition is strong, that it is not a cluster of fringe politicians. According to the official election returns, Saakashvili took slightly more than 50 percent of the vote. He cannot ignore such a strong opposition.

I would like to note the behavior of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who, after the election, met not only with the elected President, but also with the opposition. Such political move is a rare occurrence and a good example. I believe that we must behave like this in all the new independent

states, for example, in Armenia where the presidential election will take place in February. Many Russian policy-makers do not consider it necessary to get in touch with the Armenian opposition. This is wrong because no matter whether the leader of one or another state supports Russia or not, first and foremost he takes his own interests into account. That is typical of all the leaders of the post-Soviet states.
