Love and hate in Russian-Georgian relations

Dennis Sammut

Russia and Georgia have had a difficult relationship since they became independent and separate countries after the collapse of the USSR. Intrigue, distrust, and sometimes outright violence have been the hallmark of the relations between the two countries which are very different in their size and cultures, but whose history and destiny have been intertwined for over two hundred years, particularly in the seventy years of the Soviet period. In a part of the world where people have long, if distorted, collective memories, today’s actions are closely related with the recollections of the past.

1. Role of Georgians in forging the USSR
Georgians played a much more important role in the forging of the USSR and throughout its existence than the size of its population would suggest. Three key personalities in the first decades of the USSR helped to define the Union, namely Stalin, Ordzonikidze an ally of Stalin who as head of the Party’s Caucasus Bureau was the architect of its policy in the region, and Lawrenti Beria, a Georgian Party leader and an ally of Stalin who eventually became head of the KGB. The three were very different from each other but their work and policies continue to define many of the issues and arguments which are still ongoing in the Caucasus.

Stalin and Ordzonikidze felt the need to assert their Russian and internationalist credentials. They therefore tried to subjugate the Georgians, even Bolshevik Georgians, to tough Russified positions even against the advice and instructions of Lenin. After Lenin’s death Stalin seized the leadership of the Party and went on to lead the USSR for nearly thirty out of its seventy-year history. Beria, on the other hand, remained always a Georgian at heart. His policies, both as a Party leader in the Georgian SSR, and afterwards when he was moved to Moscow, were always biased in favour of Georgia, which explains why he remains something of a folk hero in Georgia, even today.

One may have expected a backlash against Georgians as Stalin and Beria fell into disgrace after Stalin’s death. However, by and large this did not happen. Georgians became experts at manipulating the command economy system of the USSR. Through skill, charm and outright deceit Georgians were very often able to get the best deal out of the Soviet system. Whilst Ukraine provided the Union with grain, and the Central Asian Republics with natural resources, Georgia provided the USSR with the nice things in life: good wine and food, artists and film directors, sparkling mineral water and unmatched bonhomie. In theory this should therefore have been a very happy arrangement. In fact it proved not to be good enough for the challenges ahead.

In the last years of the USSR Georgia was represented in the higher echelons of the Party by Edward Shevardnadze who was promoted by Gorbachev to

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1 Dennis Sammut is the Executive Director of LINKS, a British non-governmental organisation working on peace and democracy issues in societies in transition.
membership of the Politburo and as the Soviet Foreign Minister. In many ways Shevardnadze was a party member of the old school, having risen through the ranks of the Georgian CP to become its first Secretary for most of the Brezhnev era. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze had however similar views on the need for reform and a good understanding that the system in its present format was not sustainable. They both therefore set out to implement changes, and this necessarily included a charm offensive towards the West. It has become fashionable for those who recollect the USSR with nostalgia to blame Gorbachev for destroying the Union and Shevardnadze for selling it to the West. In fact whilst both men may have hastened the process by a few years there were few other options available than the ones they pursued. This notwithstanding, Shevardnadze remains a hate figure for those lamenting the loss of power of Russia, particularly in the military-security structures, and this explains some of the animosity towards him that continues to manifest itself in some Russian attitudes towards Georgia.

2. Gamsakhurdia

Whilst Gorbachev and Shevardnadze were struggling to keep the reforms on course in Moscow, things in Georgia took a turn for the worst. Jumber Patiashvili, who took over from Shevardnadze as First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, was much more conservative in his approach. He also faced greater challenges as the forces of perestroika unleashed an outpour of nationalism throughout Georgia and revived problems with some of the minorities, particularly the Abkhaz and the Ossetians. Nationalist groups rallied around Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a charismatic intellectual who was also the leader of the Georgian Helsinki Committee. Anti-Russian demonstrations became a regular feature in the centre of Tbilisi. On 9th April 1989 Russian OMON and Army units were deployed to the centre of Tbilisi.\(^2\) They broke up the demonstration with force, killing twenty-one people, including teenage girls. The whole Georgian nation was appalled. There were mass resignations from the Party and the control of the Party over society melted away overnight. The Movement for independence from Russia had been defined. In the first free election held in 1990 Gamsakhurdia was swept into power with an overwhelming majority.

Gamsakhurdia was a charismatic and chauvinistic leader. He was popular, but his popularity unleashed the worst kind of nationalist excesses. He was neither a statesman nor a good manager and Georgia swerved into anarchy. As the Soviet Union collapsed after the failed Moscow coup Georgia found itself an independent country, but with practically no government, hardly any friends and with no plan as to how to move forward.

Russian interests in Georgia suddenly became the sole prerogative of the Russian military who wanted to protect their substantial presence in the Republic and for whom Georgia was a playing ground, as well as a potential battlefield. Russia had large and lavish military bases all over Georgia and Tbilisi was the

\(^2\) Patiashvili insists that this was done without reference to the local Party Leadership. Discussion of Jumber Patiashvili with the author, April 2001.