

Georgia's Lost Potential to Support North Caucasus Decolonization

In the tumultuous 1990s, amid the intense violence of the Chechen war, a remarkable shift occurred among all my Chechen friends and acquaintances—they abruptly ceased drinking alcohol. Instead, as a gesture of camaraderie, they would raise a glass of water in toast, proclaiming: “Za vas, za nas, za svobodnyi Kavkaz!” (For you, for us, for the free Caucasus). While the toast itself was ancient, originating from Soviet times, the concluding phrase had been modified from “Severnyi (North) Kavkaz” to “Svobodnyi (Free) Kavkaz.” Through conversations with scholarly colleagues from the North Caucasus, I consistently encountered a deep-seated appreciation for Georgia, both politically and culturally. As one of my Dagestani friends, a professor expressed it, Georgia was viewed as “the only truly Caucasian nation in the South Caucasus.”

Throughout history, Georgia has grappled with the dilemma of whether to engage in the affairs of the North Caucasus or to remain aloof, sometimes even aligning tacitly, if not actively, with the colonizer's agenda. Georgia's pursuit of independence and its security and foreign policy orientations towards the West has consistently recognized the importance of a free North Caucasus under Russian influence. Consequently, all patriotic political factions in Georgia, whether predominantly liberal or nationalistic, have, to some degree, endorsed the notion of North Caucasian emancipation. Consequently, assuming that Georgia's European aspirations and its active engagement with its North Caucasian neighbors are mutually exclusive is misleading. Rather, these two policies complement each other, collectively bolstering Georgia's independence. However, the current Georgian



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government diverges from this historical stance, prioritizing accommodation with Russia over this traditional policy.

Russia-North Caucasus: a Form of Colonial Governance

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia's relations with the North Caucasus share several characteristics with the imperial and colonial conditions of the 19th century. In addition to the heavy presence of the military and other federal security services, the region is managed by co-opted local elites, reminiscent of ancient colonial auxiliaries or proxies. Through these proxies, Moscow [controls](#) the local populations more effectively, namely by securing electoral support, while in exchange, the local elites benefit from the generous redistribution of resources from the central budget and can expect the "federal stick" in the event of an internal challenge.

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Today, Russia's status as a federation appears more nominal than substantive, resembling a classic colonial empire in many aspects. Similar to historical imperial frameworks, the allegiance of peripheral elites holds greater significance than ideological or cultural unity. Despite Ramzan Kadyrov's adherence to a more fundamentalist interpretation and promotion of Islam compared to most independence fighters like Dzhokhar Dudayev and Aslan Maskhadov, his loyalty to Putin outweighs other considerations. The loyalty of local elites remains a fragile phenomenon, reminiscent of historical colonial empires where proxies eventually embraced roles as champions of independence during sig-

nificant shifts in circumstances. This prospect is feasible in today's Russian Caucasus, given the relative receptiveness of local populations to diverse ethnic nationalist discourses. In certain cases, such as Chechnya, national narratives are overtly anti-Russian and anti-colonial. While declaring unwavering loyalty to Putin, Ramzan Kadyrov also presents himself as a Chechen nationalist, suggesting that he could readily adapt as the leader of an independent Chechnya should the Russian state falter.

However, for the time being, the imperial agreement appears to be effective, as the Caucasus is relatively tranquil after two turbulent decades marked by hundreds of thousands of deaths. The insurgency has dwindled to a minimum, manifesting only in sporadic, minor-scale attacks. The decline in resistance ranks can be attributed not only to the severity of violence employed by the federal authorities but also to the emigration of the most politically committed individuals and the mass exodus of militant Islamists between 2013 and 2019 to Syria and Iraq, [facilitated](#) by Russian state intelligence. Moreover, the shift in Georgia's stance and policies following the rise of the Georgian Dream to power in 2012 has also weakened protest strength in the North Caucasus. Consequently, the bulk of the Caucasian anti-colonial movement is now evident in the diaspora, predominantly in Europe and Türkiye.

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Caucasus. Alongside Chechen battalions that have supported Ukraine since 2014, new units from Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Chechnya have emerged on Ukrainian soil. These volunteer groups often proclaim their ultimate objective as the liberation of the Caucasus from Russian hegemony, viewing Russia's defeat in Ukraine as a prerequisite for their political agenda's success. Although the decolonization movement may appear subdued within regions under Russian Federation control, subtle signs of unrest are surfacing alongside a more outspoken diaspora voice.

Georgia's pre-2012 Discreet Support to the North Caucasus

If Ukraine presently emerges as the foremost advocate for decolonization movements in the North Caucasus, it's partly due to the absence of Georgia's involvement in this arena. Notably, the current Georgian administration not only diverges from its predecessors, including the Saakashvili (2004-2012) and the Shevardnadze (1995-2003) governments but also deviates from the policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's initial post-Soviet president (1990-1992), who pursued a strategy of reconciliation with the North Caucasus. Following pressures to permit Russian airstrikes on Chechnya during the first Chechen conflict (1994-1996), Georgia's leadership displayed courage by rejecting Russian demands for joint control over the Chechen border and the utilization of Russian military bases on Georgian soil against Chechen forces. Shevardnadze, a former Communist leader and senior Soviet figure, took a significant stride of defiance against Russia, which had asserted full control over Georgia's security policy following the disastrous Abkhaz conflict. The Chechen victory and subsequent de facto independence (1996-1998) provided Georgia with greater maneuverability and confidence to pursue a West-oriented policy.

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Shevardnadze established cordial relations with Ichkeria's president, Maskhadov, who [visited](#) Tbilisi in 1997. At that time, Chechnya officially issued regret for the participation of many of its nationals in the war of Abkhazian secession, and several leading figures of the Chechen armed resistance denounced the support once given to the separatists.

During Saakashvili's tenure, Russia had already achieved success in military operations against the insurgency in Chechnya. Initially, Georgia attempted cooperation with Russia on North Caucasus security matters, anticipating a more constructive stance from Moscow regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, following the failure of these efforts and the Russian invasion and occupation of these regions in 2008, Georgia shifted its North Caucasus policy towards supporting the idea of a liberated Caucasus. This shift involved providing asylum to persecuted North Caucasian activists from Russia and serving as a venue for conferences and seminars bringing together dissidents from the region. Georgia also sought to establish connections with North Caucasian diasporas in Europe, the USA, Türkiye, and the Middle East, aiming to leverage their influence to foster better relations with North Caucasian populations.

In May 2011, Georgia [recognized](#) the Circassian genocide by parliamentary vote, and to this day remains the only country in the world to do so. A few months later, Georgia created the Circassian Cultural Center in Tbilisi, which [turned](#) into an essential place for research, reflection, and meetings between the Circassian world's various academic, associative, and cultural circles. The

Russian Federation considered both actions to be unfriendly acts. Russian participants (mainly from Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Adygea) in the conferences held at the Cherkess Cultural Center in Tbilisi were viewed with suspicion by the Russian authorities. The human rights organization Memorial has often [denounced](#) the interrogations and searches carried out on visitors to this cultural center.

In 2011, the Saakashvili government also [launched](#) PIK (Pervyi Informacionnyi Kavkazskii - First Caucasus Information Channel), a Russian-language satellite TV channel aimed at the populations of the North Caucasus. Russia tried to jam the channel's waves or directly pressure the companies owning the satellites that broadcast it. In the end, Georgia's newly elected GD government cut financing of the channel and [dismantled](#) it a few weeks after winning the elections in October 2012.

Free Caucasus: No Longer Interesting for Tbilisi

Presently, the foremost objective of the Georgian regime is to appease Russia, leading to a notable shift in the government's approach towards the region. The Georgian Dream government perceives the North Caucasus as a zone of potential threat and interprets developments in the area primarily through a Russian perspective. Consequently, any actions by Georgia directed towards the populations of this region are deemed unfavorable, as they could provoke Russia. As a result, Caucasian pro-decolonization activists no longer view Georgia as a refuge. Numerous instances exist where politically engaged individuals from North Caucasian republics have been denied entry into Georgia. Some were even [extradited](#) to Russia. Despite a visa-free regime with the Russian Federation, it is much easier for a resident of Moscow or Novosibirsk to travel to Georgia than for a Chechen or Cherkess living a few kilometers

from the Georgian border. According to testimonies from citizens of the North Caucasus republics, the Georgian authorities allegedly rely on lists provided by the Russian intelligence services to prevent undesirable personalities from entering the country.

The emblematic portrayal of the Georgian government's stance is exemplified by the [case](#) of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen (Kisti) descent. Khangoshvili, a participant in the second Chechen war fighting against Russian forces, engaged in operations against Russian Federal troops and FSB special forces in Ingushetia and Dagestan. Later, in 2007, he enlisted in the Georgian army and assumed leadership of the anti-terrorist center in the Pankisi Gorge. Following the Georgian Dream's assumption of power, Russian intelligence services, viewing Georgia as a convenient arena, made an [assassination attempt](#) on Khangoshvili in Tbilisi. Despite being a veteran officer, the Georgian government declined to provide him with security assurances, compelling him to seek refuge in Germany, where he awaited a decision on his political asylum request. Tragically, Khangoshvili was assassinated in Berlin in August 2019 by a high-ranking Russian operative apprehended by German authorities. Subsequently, the German government officially [indicted](#) Russia for state-sponsored terrorism. However, throughout the investigation and media coverage of the incident, Georgia, despite Khangoshvili being its national, remained conspicuously silent, offering no official reaction.

In recent times, Georgian authorities have fostered ties with the official political and administrative elites in the North Caucasus, acting as Moscow's regional representatives. This collaboration primarily centers around security and intelligence matters, given the limited trade between Georgia and its neighboring regions to the north. The focus of cooperation is largely on

monitoring North Caucasian individuals residing in Georgia. Additionally, Georgian authorities depend on their counterparts from the North Caucasus to oversee the religious activities within Georgia's Dagestani (predominantly Avar) and Vainakh (Kisti) communities. Observers have noted the increasing influence of networks affiliated with Ramzan Kadyrov in Pankisi, with tacit acknowledgment from Georgian authorities. Notably, a recent development saw the appointment of an imam closely associated with Kadyrov despite being a native of the gorge. This new imam was [dispatched](#) by the Chechen Muftiate, which operates under Kadyrov's direct control.

Kadyrov, who has a history of making anti-Georgian statements, appears to maintain communication channels with Georgia. Some visits by prominent figures close to Kadyrov have been observable but not officially acknowledged. For instance, in 2018, the mayor of Grozny and, subsequently, the Prime Minister of Chechnya, Muslim Khuchiev, visited Georgia purportedly as a tourist, although media reports [revealed](#) he had several high-level meetings with Georgian officials. In another instance, Chechen businessman Aslambek Akhmetkhanov, previously disgraced but rehabilitated by Kadyrov, [visited](#) Georgia in the summer of 2023 with a conspicuous motorcade flouting traffic regulations. Georgian authorities once again disclaimed the official nature of this visit.

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Georgia is a complex issue for Kadyrov. During Saakashvili's tenure, Georgia was reviled and portrayed as an ally of the Western "Great Satan,"

with Kadyrov threatening to send his troops to Georgia in support of his ultimate master, Vladimir Putin. However, Kadyrov also recognizes Georgia's significance as the sole independent state bordering Chechnya outside of the Russian Federation. Despite his allegiance to Moscow, Kadyrov seems to understand the strategic importance of Georgia as the only gateway to the outside world for Chechnya. His loyalty to Moscow (not Putin) is not so unequivocal, as he has amassed unprecedented power, consistently challenging the official structures of the Russian state and displaying overt disregard for Russian laws and constitution. Kadyrov has secured significant concessions for his Republic from Putin, surpassing those achieved by pro-independence leaders such as Maskhadov and Dudayev. In the event of strained relations with Moscow, Kadyrov may find Georgia crucial, making relations with it potentially critical for his future.

For this reason, Kadyrov, like his predecessors, regards the construction of the Grozny-Itumkale-Shatili road to Georgia as strategically vital for Chechnya. Although initiated in the 1990s during Chechnya's de facto independence, the project remains incomplete. The Chechen segment is near completion, lacking only a few kilometers. Kadyrov consistently advocates for the road's opening, emphasizing its economic and practical advantages (currently, traveling from Chechnya to Georgia requires a lengthy detour through North Ossetia and the Lars checkpoint). He has stressed that this route would not only connect Chechnya to Georgia but also to Türkiye, Iran, and European nations. To persuade Moscow to support the project, Kadyrov has even [highlighted](#) Georgia's growing significance for Russia amidst Western sanctions. However, Russia's central authority has yet to take decisive action to facilitate the project's progress. Meanwhile, the Georgian government has shown no initiative in constructing its portion of the highway.

Georgia's Unexploited Potential

Georgia holds a significant position in the political consciousness of North Caucasians, a fact often overlooked by the vast majority of Georgians. Paradoxically, decades, if not centuries, of Russian and Soviet imperial and colonial policies have aimed at severing ties between the peoples on both sides of the Caucasus, fostering division, and instigating conflict. In the 19th century, many members of the Georgian nobility were offered prominent positions in the Tsarist army and participated in the conquest of the North Caucasus. However, the war in Abkhazia (1992-93), where numerous North Caucasians fought against Tbilisi, further strained relations, largely due to Moscow's influence. Consequently, North Caucasians are considerably less acquainted with Georgians, despite their cultural and geographical proximity, compared to Russians. Conversely, Georgians possess minimal knowledge about North Caucasian societies and seldom venture to this region.

Despite this, research indicates that the perceptions and attitudes of North Caucasians towards Georgians and the Georgian state differ from those in other regions of the Russian Federation and are generally more positive. A comprehensive [study](#) conducted by the Ebert Foundation in 2021 revealed that, despite the influence of Russian propaganda, even in North Ossetia, which holds the most negative disposition towards Georgia

among Caucasian republics, opinions on Georgia tended to be more favorable compared to all other non-Caucasian regions of the Russian Federation. Among the seven republics of the North Caucasus, Ingushetia and Chechnya exhibited the most favorable views towards Georgia, followed by Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and North Ossetia.

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Experience and current public opinion in the North Caucasus indicate that Georgia plays a crucial role in the prospective decolonization of the region. Against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine and Kyiv's efforts to serve as a platform for all liberation movements among Russia's colonized peoples, additional support from Georgia could have significantly shifted the power balance against Russia. However, the current government has opted for a different path, one of collaboration with Moscow. Ironically, the Georgian government justifies its criticism of Europe and European values by emphasizing its attachment to Georgia's Caucasian identity. In reality, the policy of the Georgian Dream party turns its back on the aspirations for freedom and independence of the Caucasian people. It neither aligns with European values nor supports Caucasian interests; instead, it leans towards a pro-Russian stance ■