

Reconciliation That Isn't

Ivanishvili's "War Apology" is Vulgar Electioneering – And a Dangerous One at That

Historians like to remind us of moments in human history when political leaders have moved with an ambition to overcome centuries of enmity through their sheer will and bridge the rivers of spilled blood with a promise of hope. Think of Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling in Warsaw and also his Ostpolitik, remember the Good Friday Agreement, or the US President Richard Nixon's visit to China, recall the transforming spirit of the Schuman Agreement, or Yitzhak Rabin's doomed vision for peace in the (much) promised land, or the almost-reunification of Cyprus. These statesmen did not always succeed, but they marked the spirits even then.

Hearing the news about the "apology for war" coming from Tbilisi, an uninformed observer could be excused for believing that the founder and patron of the Georgian ruling party was trying to conjure a similar act of dramatic symbolism, especially as he was speaking on the campaign trail in the town

of Gori, ravaged by a 2008 military incursion by Russia.

Yet, such a perception would be wrong; for the case of transformative leadership, it wasn't.

Ivanishvili, speaking hesitantly and preening at the teleprompter, [said this](#) from behind a bullet-proof glass podium:

"Immediately after the 26 October elections, when those who instigated the war would face justice, when all those guilty of destroying the Georgian-Ossetian brotherhood and coexistence will receive their due, harshest legal verdict, we will find it in ourselves to apologize that acting upon orders, the treasonous National Movement put our Ossetian sisters and brothers up to the flames. And since forgiveness is one of the keystones of our - Georgian and Ossetian - shared Christian faith, I am confident that the fratricidal confrontation instigated by Georgia's enemies will end with mutual forgiveness and sincere reconciliation."



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This was not the first time: from its early days in 2012, the Georgian Dream has repeatedly campaigned on the promise of what it inelegantly called “ending” the United National Movement (UNM), its predecessor and nemesis. But what first seemed to be a promise to send the opponents into a political knockout became a personal threat. And what once seemed to be circumscribed to the small clique of publicly derided former officials today grew to encompass all of the opposition, something that the ruling party has made extremely clear.

“I promise you that the Georgian Nuremberg Trials [against the collective United National Movement] will be held very soon and will become one of the preconditions of reconciliation,” this was the opening passage of Ivanishvili’s Gori speech.

Maybe this was purely domestic politicking? A campaign bravado of a self-appointed oligarch-cum-savior? A disturbing, perhaps even deranged, narrative with no bearing on reality?

Yet, there is more to this statement than meets the superficial eye as it points to its author’s glaring, Russia-sized blind spot, the foreign and do-

mestic policy machinery that can no longer check the leader’s incompetence and the way his fundamentally flawed worldview affects, infects and, ultimately, substitutes the *raison d’état*. A lesson to observe, without a doubt, well beyond Georgia’s ramshackle frontiers.

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Bear Me No Bears!

Curiously, Ivanishvili did not pronounce the word “Russia” a single time in the context of the 2008 war. This is despite the uncontested fact that Russian military crossed an international border, despite the war crimes charges [brought](#) against Tskhinvali officials and the Russian Major General by the International Criminal Court, despite the fact that the European Court of Human Rights threw out the war crimes claims against Georgia not [once](#), but [twice](#), and [ruled](#) that Russia was responsible for the breach of six articles of the European Convention of Human Rights as well as for failure to conduct an effective investigation into the alleged breach of the right to life in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008.

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The Georgian Dream bases its premise of the UNM’s responsibility for “sending the Ossetian

brothers and sisters up in flames” on the peculiar [interpretation](#) of the [report](#) by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, also known as the “Tagliavini Report,” named after Heidi Tagliavini - a Swiss diplomat who led the Mission. That interpretation is in line with what the Kremlin has been insisting on and what Tbilisi (including after the Georgian Dream came to power) has been resisting in the international arena.

The report said the “shelling” of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7-8 August “marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict.” It did, however, add that any explanation of the origins of the war “cannot focus solely on the artillery attack on Tskhinvali in the night of 7-8 August” but must take into account the waves of escalation that occurred before. Crucially, the Mission said that it is “not in a position to consider as sufficiently substantiated the Georgian claim concerning a large-scale Russian military incursion into South Ossetia before 8 August 2008” but added that “there seems to have been an influx of volunteers or mercenaries from the territory of the Russian Federation to South Ossetia through the Roki tunnel and over the Caucasus range in early August” and that Russia verifiably started to attack Georgian military targets before the time it officially announced as the time of the intervention.

Georgia officially [contested](#) some of these statements at the time of the report’s publication in 2009. And while Amb. Tagliavini recently [said](#) she stands by the findings, who in their right mind would minimize the “influx of volunteers and mercenaries” from Russia after the “little green men” took over Crimea in 2014 and after Moscow plunged Ukraine into war on two separate occasions?

Some authors, like Tom de Waal, have [argued](#) that “some Georgians have used the Ukraine crisis to

gild their version of history” and military analysts also purported that Tbilisi may have [miscalculated](#) the degree of Moscow’s willingness to engage militarily. Yet, there is no denying that the assessments of the Russian motives and intentions in the European capitals back in 2009 were a far cry from their current position. The European Union and the US were not going to pick a fight with the Kremlin over Georgia (witness the infamous “reset”) and the Tagliavini Report gave them a way to minimize that “incident.”

In truth, Ivanishvili considered the 2008 war to be the UNM’s fault from the outset. He said so in 2013 that the escalation that preceded the war was “not serious enough” and that it was “unjustifiable to start military actions before Russian [troops] crossed Georgian borders” – copying Moscow’s interpretation.

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In his [interview](#) with the Russian official outlet Izvestiya, Russia’s former spy chief, Nikolay Patrushev, said the US “organized” the 2008 war. A similar line [was taken](#) by the top Russian diplomat at the United Nations. Lastly, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov took the leaf from the Georgian Dream’s

talking points and [accused](#) the West of attempts to open the “second front” in Georgia.

In other words, not only does Ivanishvili’s “apology” have a Russia-sized hole in it but it also shares the worldview with the Kremlin – that of the malicious West conspiring to instigate war and instability for its egoistic regional interests and by plunging client regimes into war. Where does the “apology” fit in?

Can Conspiracies Cut Both Ways?

Ivanishvili’s worldview has become progressively more steeped in conspiracy theories. Central to his party’s election campaign was the narrative of a Global Party of War orchestrating schemes to undermine the Georgian Dream.

In this context, the “apology” thesis was meant to work in conjunction with a campaign [promise](#). The Georgian Dream said it sought a supermajority because “in the case of a peaceful restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity, constitutional amendments will be necessary in order to bring the Georgian system of government and territorial state arrangement in line with the new reality,” noting that “given the opposition’s anti-state attitude,” it will not support amending the constitution and become an “obstacle” on this path. In other words, the Georgian Dream said it may have needed to modify the constitution to achieve the goal of territorial integrity.

Let’s hypothetically consider what such changes might be. Two possibilities come to mind – modifying the elements of the constitution’s provision, which defines Georgia as a unitary state with broad autonomy for Abkhazia, or modifying the article on Euro-Atlantic integration. In other words, either making Georgia a confederation or abandoning its NATO (and/or EU) objective.

Since no further details have emerged, hints are

being dropped that Russia may “give Abkhazia and South Ossetia back” in exchange for certain concessions – something that is not grounded in any tangible diplomatic reality so far. Yet, with the Russian chokehold being [tightened](#) on Sokhumi, some in the opposition there [fear](#) that the authorities could be forced into unacceptable concessions.

Since Russia’s officials are [praising](#) Georgia’s “maturity” – like veteran Georgia negotiator Grigory Karasin – and saying the two occupied provinces may also need to “turn the page,” [like](#) Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova – the local strongmen in the two occupied provinces will get jittery and Ivanishvili can try to sell their nervousness as proof of the success of his peaceful policy.

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One thing about conspiracies is that they are unverifiable. Another difference is that in contrast to real political visions, like the ones we referenced at the outset of this article, they often ignore the intricacies of the diplomatic process. Still, the negotiation process formally exists and continues as do the positions cautiously built over the years.

What’s On the Table?

The Geneva International Discussions (GID) is a format that brings together the EU, the OSCE, and the UN as mediators, Georgia and Russia, as well as *de facto* and *de jure* representatives from Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. It was launched as a follow-up to a contested and only partially fulfilled 2008 ceasefire agreement, concluded under the aegis of the French EU Presidency. The six-point “*Protocole d’Accord*,” signed on 12 August 2008 by French President Nicolas Sarkozy – acting in his capacity as the President of the European Council – with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, postulates an immediate ceasefire, the non-use of force, the

withdrawal of Russian and Georgian troops to *ex-ante* positions, and the opening of an international discussion on the modalities of security and stability in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The objectives of the GID mediation have been blurry. The 12 August 2008 protocol has tasked the GID to deal with the modalities of security and stability arrangements and with the ways to address the plight of refugees and displaced persons. But by the time the GID had gathered for its first meeting, the co-chairs had already internalized the impossibility of full implementation of the ceasefire agreement. The reason was Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states and the subsequent deployment of Russian military bases there "on the basis of bilateral agreements."

These "new realities," the Russian diplomats claim, have nullified the provisions of the 12 August 2008 agreement, including Russia's obligation to withdraw its forces. As a result, participants saw the objectives of the GID differently. Moreover, they disagreed fundamentally about their respective roles – Russia claims to be in a facilitator role while Georgia considers Russia its direct adversary, a party to the August 2008 war and the existing ethnic conflicts, and the power which is in effective control of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions.

Georgia views the GID as a process of mediation with Russia following the August 2008 war between the two countries. Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia consider the format as a part of the negotiations regarding the conflict between Georgia, on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the other, while the August 2008 crisis is portrayed as just one significant escalation in a general context of conflicts. In this sense, Russia continues to insist that Georgia concludes a binding non-use-of-force agreement with both provinces. Georgia's official position has been that such a signature would imply the recognition of the two

provinces as subjects of international law. Instead, Georgia sought a non-use-of-force agreement with Moscow.

The GID as a negotiation format has been moribund since Russia invaded Ukraine. The Kremlin has also been pushing for moving the talks to neutral grounds, suggesting Minsk.

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Despite the inability of the GID to deliver, it has been the ground for staking out the official diplomatic positions of the sides. Perhaps surprisingly, the Georgian Dream did not succeed in substantively shifting Georgia's position which remains roughly along the same lines as it was after the end of 2008 hostilities. Former GD Minister charged with conflicts, Paata Zakareishvili, who has since parted ways with the ruling party, has argued in his [book](#) that while his party has intended to re-imagine these negotiations also as negotiations with Sokhumi and Tskhinvali as "sides to the conflict," he has failed. Zakareishvili names two reasons for this: the incompetence of his party colleagues and the high level of competence of the civil servants in foreign policy and security establishment at the mid-level. These "busy little bees," as he calls them, have prevented the new government from shifting the course.

This is a telling claim in the current context. Ivanishvili's personal position on the 2008 war and the conflict may have remained broadly unchanged since 2012 but since then, the checks on his personal whims within the GD (which used to be a coalition in 2012) have weakened considerably and the "busy little bees" in the civil service have been weaned out or left of their own accord due to disagreements with the overall foreign policy course.

A Georgian “apology” – in the way in which Ivanishvili seems to envisage it – would be a boon for Moscow. Ivanishvili may look at diplomats disdainfully but the Kremlin never forgets about the formal negotiating positions.

Yet, Georgia’s negotiating positions at the GID remain mostly intact. It is no surprise that Russia still insists on Tbilisi signing a binding legal agreement on the non-use of force – a single critical policy objective it still maintains in the GID. A Georgian “apology” – in the way in which Ivanishvili seems to envisage it – would be a boon for Moscow. Ivanishvili may look at diplomats disdainfully but the Kremlin never forgets about the formal negotiating positions. For Russia, the victory at the negotiating table – even in a peripheric format like the GID – represents a kernel of victory on a larger chessboard where it challenges and seeks to overturn the established world order.

Against the Grain

Ivanishvili’s talk of an apology is not about restoring justice nor would it contribute to peace. It is about eliminating the opposition and claiming absolute power based on an exceptional, non-institutional, and supreme knowledge of the workings of this world. Invoking such a possibility, believing in a conspiracy having an impact on reality is not only delusional but also dangerous in several real-life ways.

Firstly, it is fundamentally based on a conspiracy mentality which says bigger powers toy behind the scenes with the fates of the lesser actors who have no agency of their own. This worldview is fundamentally disadvantageous for Georgia. Secondly, it is essentially based on the belief in Russian victory – both in Ukraine and, more generally, in upending the influence of the Western powers internationally and, more narrowly, in the South Caucasus. Thirdly, based on that understanding, Ivanishvili’s “virtue signaling” implicitly places Georgia under Russia’s patronage – something consistently detrimental to Tbilisi’s security ambitions in recent decades. Fourthly, it takes away the agency from the Georgian people in favor of the omniscient benefactor – Ivanishvili himself – thus undermining democracy. Finally, any steps taken in that direction without an institutional backup and accompanying adjustment of the negotiating position means handing Russia a diplomatic and political victory at the expense of Georgia’s national interest.

The reason why Ivanishvili can even be making such an outlandish claim without public consultation or support is that he has managed to subdue the “little bees” of Georgia’s institutions and can govern unchallenged and unhinged. Given the official October parliamentary election results (provided that they stand), the dreams unhinged from reality may indeed become a living nightmare ■