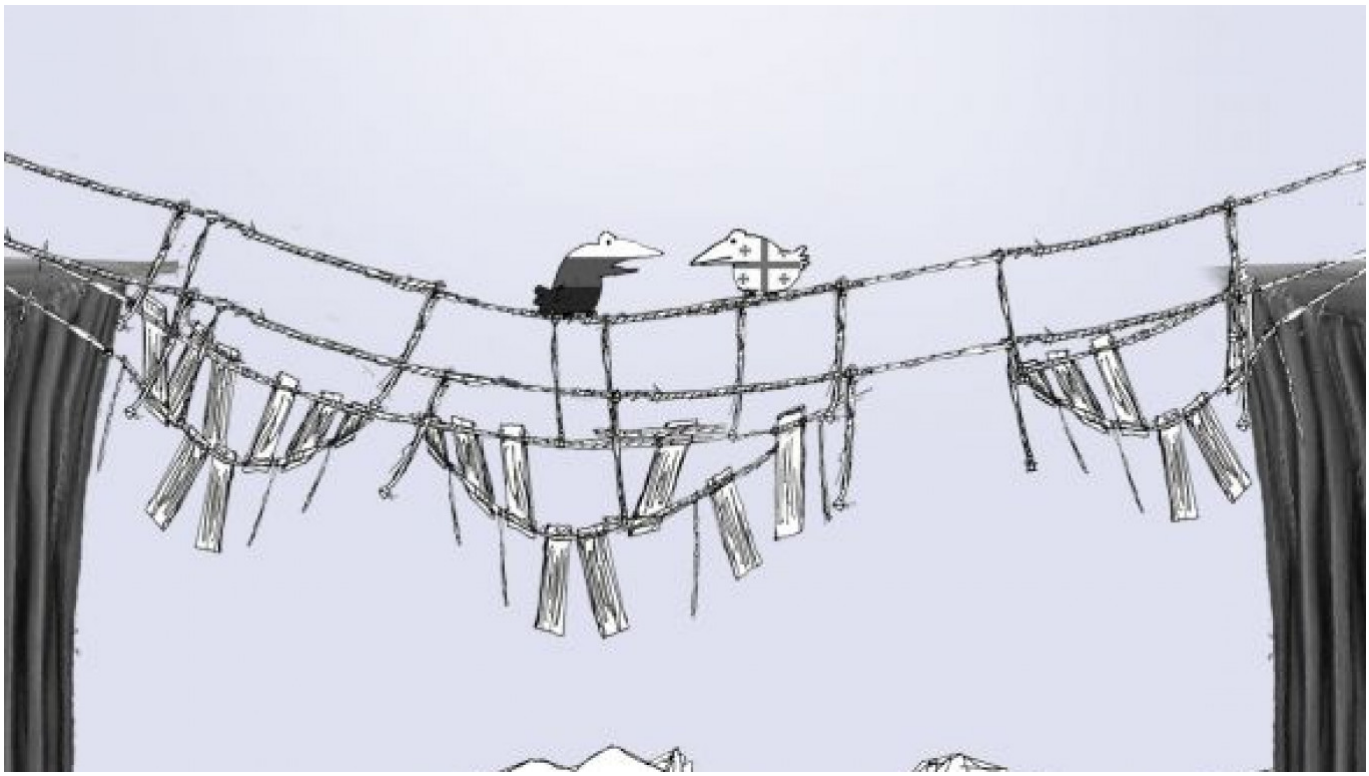
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

4 Things Worth Talking About

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August 01, 2010



As the second anniversary of the August 2008 war approaches this week, Georgians, Abkhaz, Ossetians and Russians are still recovering from the conflict's terrible legacy. On the one hand, there is a sense of exhaustion, hopelessness and cynicism on all sides. Restoring peace through a mutually agreed resolution today seems a very remote possibility — a task, perhaps, for the next generation of those who have lived side by side for centuries but will now have to endure decades of separation.

At the same time, the second anniversary is a good time to begin the long process of reconciliation that needs to take place on all levels between Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia.

Georgia's television network Imedi depicted a terrifying scenario on March 13 in which domestic political protests in Georgia escalated into a crisis triggering Russian military intervention. This broadcast caused widespread panic in Georgia, triggering security concerns along the cease-fire lines, eventually leading to strong protest from the United States, the European Union and several individual European states featured in the film. While the broadcast aimed to discredit Georgian opposition leaders who had traveled to Moscow to meet

Russian leaders, it had the reverse effect. In graphic detail it demonstrated to ordinary Georgians — and the international community — the dangers of the current state of relations between Russia and Georgia. Although a new war is unlikely, the volatile status quo is likely to persist. Thus a serious dialogue is needed to begin developing ideas on how Russia and Georgia can peacefully coexist, while there is no agreed settlement of conflicts over the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

This will not be easy. Diplomatic relations between Moscow and Tbilisi were severed after 2008. President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin insist that they will not speak to the Georgian government as long as President Mikheil Saakashvili remains in power. Georgian officials have demanded that Russia withdraw its forces from the occupied territories as a precondition for any official talks.

In Georgia, many of those who openly advocate a dialogue are branded as traitors or enemies. In Russia, those wishing to speak with the current political elite in Tbilisi are criticized for being naive or foolish. Despite these reservations, Georgians and Russians are talking on many levels.

Both Russian and Georgian officials recently participated in the 12th round of the Geneva discussions under the dedicated co-chairmanship of the EU, the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. These discussions are very valuable as the only channel for official dialogue, but achieving practical results with the Geneva discussions is painfully slow.

Proxy contacts, which were initially facilitated by Armenia and later taking place on the

Georgian-Russian border, brought the first major breakthrough in relations between the two states: the opening of the mountainous Verkhni Lars border in March.

In addition, several opposition figures have taken the initiative to enter into public dialogue. On the Georgian side, the former prime minister, Zurab Nogailedi, and the former parliamentary speaker, Nino Burjanadze, have traveled to Moscow to meet Putin. On the Russian side, opposition leader Garry Kasparov has traveled to Tbilisi and was received by Saakashvili. These were portrayed as public relations gestures and have won little support within their respective societies.

But all of these forms of contact are either too limited or too politicized to make a difference. What is required is a sustained dialogue between mainstream political elites on both sides, which could begin to build confidence and shape a new environment in which a peace process could one day emerge.

To begin with, the dialogue has to address the problem that each side no longer has a good understanding of what is happening on the opposite side. In Georgia, there is a belief that Russia could be made more vulnerable by its domestic problems — mainly the economy and separatism and terrorism in the North Caucasus — and by a change of policy in Washington if U.S. President Barack Obama fails to obtain tangible benefits from the “reset” initiative. This vulnerability, it is assumed, would make Russia more open to reconsidering its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In Russia, there is still a prevailing view that the current government in Tbilisi has lost its popular support and could be on the way out at any moment. Russian experts and politicians were surprised by the strong show of support for pro-government forces during Tbilisi's mayoral election.

The prevalence of myths and the lack of communication between the two sides make it virtually impossible to prevent or manage any future crises. Therefore, a confidence-building process that enhances mutual understanding of each other and of the shared post-war security environment should be the most important task for the coming months and years.

The starting assumption of this new dialogue process should be that we are unlikely to see a change of the ruling elite in either country in the near future. Therefore, the process should engage those in power today, rather than exclude them.

Second, such a dialogue, while being sustained and representative, should be unofficial, flexible and forward-looking. It should include those members of the elite who can embrace such rules of engagement, while also being able to communicate their experience with the public back home. This dialogue should not be seen as undermining any official talks or contacts with nongovernmental organizations, but complement and reinforce them.

Third, the dialogue should go beyond a discussion of post-war challenges. It should also help exchange views on domestic modernization processes under way in both countries, on regional and global developments, and on common economic interests.

Finally, the dialogue should initially be facilitated by a neutral third party — be it a nongovernmental entity or an international organization. It might be even helpful to place it within a wider multilateral context involving various actors from across the Caucasus, Europe, the Black Sea region or other groupings to which both Russia and Georgia belong. But the ultimate goal of the process should be that, over time, Georgians and Russia are able to speak directly without any need for the involvement of a third party.

In an ideal world, such a contact would develop into a confidence-building process to help remove the possibility of dangerous miscalculations on both sides. Such a Georgian-Russian dialogue would not mean accepting a new status quo, nor would it symbolize the failure of one side or the other to achieve its strategic objectives. Instead, talks would demonstrate to the people in the region and the outside world that a new war is inconceivable and that peace can one day come to both sides of the Caucasus Mountains.

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