

The Role of Social and Humanitarian Cooperation in the Development of Russian-Georgian Relations

Timur Zufarovich Mansurov* and Radmir Vladimirovich Ivanov

Institute of Social and Philosophical Sciences and Mass Communications, Kazan Federal University, Russia

Abstract: The study is aimed at detection of the features of social and humanitarian cooperation between Russia and Georgia and their impact on the development of relations between the two countries. The possibilities of implementing this cooperation are considered in the absence of political and diplomatic relations. The authors analyze the specifics of inter-state ties and relations development in social, cultural, scientific, educational and spiritual spheres, as well as the obstacles that hinder such interaction. The potential of inter-state dialogue formats such as the "Geneva discussions on security and stability in Transcaucasia", as well as the "Karasin-Abashidze" diplomatic line is being studied. Special attention is paid to the role of non-profit organizations and foundations, including those operating on the territory of Georgia, contributing to the expansion of contacts and ties between the two countries and promotion of the Eurasian vector of Georgia's development. Based on the empirical data of sociological research conducted both in Russia and Georgia, the author of the article identifies the problems that exist in the relations between the two states, and shows the importance of deepening social and humanitarian cooperation to solve them. Research data shows that currently the number of supporters of the pro-Russian vector of the country development, which can become a significant factor in solving many social, economic and political problems of the Georgian state.

Keywords: Social and humanitarian cooperation, interstate formats of relations, dialogue, civil society, cultural cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

Russian culture has a long and rich cultural history, steeped in literature, ballet, painting and classical music. While outsiders may see the country as drab, Russia has a very visual cultural past, from its colorful folk costumes to its ornate religious symbols (Dvali & Gachechiladze, 2020). In comparison, Georgian culture is an exotic, mysterious and ancient culture stretching back for millennia. Elements of Anatolian, European, Persian, Arabian, Ottoman and Far Eastern cultures have influenced Georgia's own ethnic identity resulting in one of the most unique and hospitable cultures in the world. Georgian culture is world renowned for being accommodating and tolerant (Georgia 2020).

In the absence of diplomatic relations and settlement of political contradictions between the countries, social and humanitarian interaction plays a significant role in promoting cooperation between Russia and Georgia. The process of normalization of relations between the two countries after B. Ivanishvili's "Georgian dream" party came to power in Georgia, which initiated this issue, gave important impetus to its development. The course of two states convergence was supported by Russia, which even created a special diplomatic channel "Karasin-Abashidze" to address various issues of bilateral cooperation, although not related to political relations (Kupatadze, 2020;

Grigorieva 2020). Along with the Geneva discussions on security and stability in the Transcaucasus, two dialogue formats led both to preservation of relations in certain areas, and to their strengthening and development. According to the Senator, and previously State Secretary-Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia G. Karasin, "Now the agenda of our meetings includes almost a dozen specific areas and directions of cooperation in which progress is clearly visible. We are becoming a kind of coordinators of line ministries activities, which try to solve a particular problem in mutual contacts via us" (Karasin: The Russian – Georgian negotiations concern a dozen areas, 2020). He also noted the significant compensatory role of the dialogue in the absence of political and diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia.

Speaking of implementation of the social and humanitarian direction in the development of bilateral relations, we should mention the importance of existing dialogue formats of interaction. They address issues of trade and economic cooperation, which have put Russia in second place among Georgia's foreign trade partners, as well as issues of transport, cultural and humanitarian cooperation (Dvali and Gachechiladze 2020). We can highlight the following significant achievements: resuming and increase of passenger and cargo transportation, air links between countries, simplification of the visa regime both for business people and for ordinary nationals. The number of contacts between representatives of the public, science, culture, sports and tourism is growing. It is

*Address correspondence to this author at the Institute of Social and Philosophical Sciences and Mass Communications, Kazan Federal University, Russia; E-mail: m.research94@yahoo.com

important that the issues of interaction between the two countries in various spheres contribute to the involvement of relevant ministries and departments in their solution. In particular, this is performed in the "Karasin – Abashidze" format, which cannot but stimulate the development of political relations.

METHODS

The research methodology is based on the systematic and institutional approaches. The systematic approach allowed us to conduct a comprehensive analysis of various spheres of social and humanitarian cooperation between Russia and Georgia and their impact on the development of interstate relations at the present stage. This methodology helped to identify the specifics of interaction, and contradictions and conflicts that prevent the building of full and harmonious relations between the former Soviet republics. Application of the activity approach helped to study the implementation of certain directions and specific areas of interaction between Russia and Georgia (social, cultural, scientific, educational, spiritual), their dynamics and potential impact on the interaction of societies and states. The article also uses empirical research data to identify the attitude of the two states people to each other and the need to solve the existing problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Due to operation of various relation formats, as well as the impossibility of Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO in the foreseeable future, the interaction of countries at the civil and expert communities level is being strengthened. Active work has been held within the framework of the expert dialogue in various formats. One of the most relevant is the "Istanbul process" (Mansurov, Tereshina, Ivanov and Shibanova 2016), launched in 2008 by the Georgian Scientist G. Khutsishvili, Director of the International center on conflict and negotiation. Currently, meetings of experts from various fields are held with the assistance of such well-known non-governmental organizations and foundations as the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict and the A. Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, Russian Council on International Affairs, etc. Since 2013, meetings of experts have been held within the framework of the project "Promoting the Russia – Georgia dialogue", significantly assisted by the Swiss authorities (Mukhanov, 2018). This format attracts experts from various spheres of society, expands the scope of their

activities, and offers evidence-based solutions to urgent problems in Russian-Georgian relations, bringing them to the representatives of the authorities of the two countries.

A certain disadvantage of expert meetings is the lack of noticeable results, given the overall state of relations between the two countries. We can agree with the researcher N. Silaev, saying that "Russia invests in the means of its messages delivering, but practically does not invest in their content. Probably, based on the assumption that "all things will fall into place". For example, much more funds are allocated to public diplomacy projects than to research in the field of international relations and regional studies. When there is too many parties, there is a deficit of thoughts" (Silaev, 2014; Markedonov and Suchkov2020; Kireeva, Zaviyalov, Saginova and Zavyalova 2020). The researcher suggests to reduce the number of useless activities and to start specific activities.

The need to develop and intensify relations in social and humanitarian sphere is also confirmed by results of public opinion research conducted both in Georgia and in Russia. It is worth noting that some data from empirical studies do not exclusively concern the issues of relations between the two countries, but their results allow us to draw very important conclusions. Quite interesting in this regard is the study "Public opinion in Georgia", conducted by the National democratic institute of the United States from July 13 to 29, 2019¹. 49% of people in the survey believed that their country was moving in the wrong direction, probably taking into account the difficulties of domestic development and, above all, social and economic problems. This percentage was the highest in the last ten years. 18% of respondents held the opposite position, while 30% believed that the situation in the republic has not changed at all. The most important problems touching everyone and their family are jobs (48%), rising prices and inflation (34%), poverty (33%), territorial integrity (29%), pensions (22%), and wages (19%) (Public Attitudes in Georgia. Results of April 2019 survey, 2020). Thereat, only a third of respondents believed that they were economically better off than their parents' generation. It is also interesting that Georgian people pay more attention to relations with Russia (12%) than to NATO membership (6%) (Public

¹The survey was based on a representative sample in all regions of the country (except Abkhazia and South Ossetia), including people aged 18 years and older in the capital, large urban, small urban, rural and minority settlements.

Attitudes in Georgia. Results of April 2019 survey, 2020).

Analyzing the empirical data, we can draw at least two important conclusions. First, the Georgian economy is undergoing a certain strength test, it needs new investments, while outcomes of implementation of the EU Association Agreement do not yet bring significant dividends for stable development. Second, there is a need to deepen Georgia's economic ties with Russia, primarily through expanding social and humanitarian contacts. Georgia could take a more active part at civil and expert communities level and develop joint plans and recommendations to improve economic relations between the two states, which would give new incentives to its development.

Some other empirical data obtained in the study also prove the above conclusions. When asked whether the collapse of the Soviet Union was a good or bad event for Georgia, the opinions of the country's people have not changed significantly, but 41% consider it a negative event, among which 30% are people aged 18 - 34, that is, the younger generation. Considering the foreign policy vector of Georgia's development, we should note changes in the opinions of respondents regarding the country's accession to the EU and NATO membership. According to data 2019, the number of those who did not support this process was 14% and 17%, respectively. Interestingly, these figures increased mainly due to respondents who had previously hesitated with the answer (Public Attitudes in Georgia. Results of April 2019 survey, 2020). In our opinion, the change in the opinion of Georgian people is connected with the deepening process of developing relations between the two countries at social, cultural and humanitarian levels and with the "soft power" policy pursued by Russia in some areas of bilateral cooperation. At the same time, the study shows that the number of supporters of Georgia's alternative development bypassing the EU increased after signing of the Association Agreement by Georgia and elimination of visa for Georgian citizens (Public Attitudes in Georgia. Results of April 2019 survey, 2020).

The urgency of social and humanitarian cooperation between Russia and Georgia is also reflected in other results of the public opinion survey. Thus, people of the country believe that the main economic assets of Georgia are concentrated in the spheres of tourism (48%) and agriculture (31%). Taking into account the fact that the majority of tourists in Georgia are Russian

people, and significant share of agricultural products enter the Russian market, the deepening of cooperation between the two countries is unlikely to raise serious objections. Another factor is labor migration. The survey also showed that for 56% of migrants abroad money transfers are the main source of income in the family (Public Attitudes in Georgia. Results of April 2019 survey, 2020).

If we consider the results of research conducted by Russian organizations, the picture is somewhat different. For example, the survey of the Public Opinion Foundation, Georgia. How people feel about Georgia and how they assess Georgian-Russian relations and their prospects" presented interesting data on the dynamics of relations between the two countries and interaction at the level of civil societies². The opinions were distributed as follows: 32% of respondents feel "good" about Georgia, 54% – "indifferent", 8% - "bad" and 6% chose the option "I can't answer". Out of the total number of respondents, 69% believe that good relations are equally important for both countries, 5% believe that they are important only for Russia, and 16% – for Georgia, while the remaining 10% found it difficult to answer. It turns out that Russians are quite optimistic about the prospects for cooperation between the countries. Thus, respondents believe that in 5-10 years, relations between Russia and Georgia will be "good" and only 7% – "bad". At the same time, a large number of respondents found it difficult to answer the question – 46% (Georgia, 2020; Markedonov and Suchkov2020).

The study revealed motivations of people in choosing the appropriate response options. Those respondents who have a positive attitude to the Caucasus Republic specified the following motives: "Good people" (8%), "Personal positive associations" (5%), "Fraternal people, neighbors" (4%), "There is no reason for a bad attitude to Georgia" (3%), "Beautiful nature, resorts, attractions" (2%), "Good relations between countries" (2%), "Former republic of the USSR" (2%), etc. The reasons for negative attitude towards Georgia were as follows: "Bad attitude to Russia, affinity with the United States, NATO" (3%), "Military actions in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, politics of M. Saakashvili" (1%), "I don't like the people" (1%), etc (Georgia, 2020).

²The survey was conducted from August 18 - 19, 2018 on a representative sample basis in 53 entities of the Russian Federation, 104 localities, people aged 18 years and older. The number of respondents: 1500.

Analyzing the empirical data, we can draw the following conclusions. The results of the study show that the positive attitude of Russians to Georgia far exceeds the attitude of Georgians to Russia. Thereat, it should be noted that many respondents find it difficult to answer this or that question, which, in our opinion, is due to a number of changes taking place in Georgia and Russia's own policy towards the former Soviet republic. Despite that, the study showed that the need to build friendly relations is mainly due to historical, cultural, social, mental and spiritual ties that have developed between the peoples.

SUMMARY

Thus, the development of Russian-Georgian relations in social and humanitarian sphere is a very important area of bilateral cooperation. The states should avoid crossing red lines related to political interaction and conflict resolution, but get round, seeking for spheres of interaction, which previously seemed impossible. The study showed that historical past of the two states, preserved in human minds, can give an additional impulse to the development of their relations, since it passed on from generation to generation and forms an important worldview of a person, his social and cultural values, and which will contribute to overcome obstacles and solve old problems if there is a political will and desire of the parties. The historical past should become a serious resource for reducing the hostile rhetoric in relations between the two countries and contribute to their normalization (Alexandrova, 2020; Grigorieva 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Lack of new positive trends in political relations between the two states makes it quite difficult to project the future development. In this regard, the resumption of cultural, humanitarian, scientific and educational contacts could be important in the current conditions. Georgian political scientist T. Pkhaladze noted that "Cultural and scientific contacts between the two countries can serve as a good platform for discussing controversial historical issues, as well as with participation of representatives of Abkhazian and Ossetian society. For example, Russian and Georgian archives contain many documents that are of key importance for the study of modern history. Joint research will contribute to the establishment and assessment of historical processes and individual facts, as well as to depoliticization of some controversial issues" (Pkhaladze, 2014). However, today contacts in

the scientific and educational sphere are rather frozen. Research projects between educational institutions of the two countries are not being developed, including within the framework of grant activities, and the implementation of student exchange programs, including various types of scientific and practical activities, is poor. We can agree with the opinion of a number of Russian and Georgian scientists that scientific ties are developing mainly on a personal level, but they decrease, too, since the state is poorly represented in the system of bilateral scientific contacts support.

Despite some shortcomings, it can be noted that the relations between the two countries become more rational and will be determined by the ability to acquire partners and skills for conflict-free resolution of urgent issues and contradictions.

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

The authors prepared and performed the following work:

Timur Zufarovich Mansurov- made a significant contribution to the concept, obtaining and analysis of the data,

Radmir Vladimirovich Ivanov- presentation of the results, preparation of the original draft, proofreading and editing of the final version of the paper.

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