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Georgia's Revived Russia Channel and the Risk of Bilateral Bargaining

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On 21 October 2026 Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze appointed First Deputy Foreign Minister Giorgi Zurabashvili as his Special Representative for Relations with Russia. The post had been vacant since December 2025. Zurabashvili keeps his ministerial rank, which places the bilateral channel inside the Foreign Ministry rather than beside it. Kobakhidze named the peaceful resolution of the conflict with Russia as a priority, alongside trade and humanitarian questions, and said the Geneva format would continue.

The appointment is more than a personnel decision. Peaceful conflict resolution has until now belonged to the Geneva International Discussions, where the EU, the UN and the OSCE sit as co-chairs and where Russia's obligations under the 2008 ceasefire stay on the table. Moving it into a direct channel with Moscow would strip those guarantees away. Georgia would then negotiate alone with a state that holds overwhelming military, economic and diplomatic leverage, at a moment when its partnerships with the EU and the United States are already hollowed out. The question is not whether Tbilisi should talk to Moscow. It is under what institutional conditions.

1. WHAT HAPPENED

The channel now being revived dates from late 2012. The Abashidze–Karasin format gave Georgia and Russia a direct line after the 2008 war and the severance of diplomatic relations. Its agenda covered trade, transport, economic and humanitarian questions. Security and the humanitarian consequences of the war stayed formally with the Geneva discussions.

The technical framing never settled the doubts about it. In February 2023 a recording of a June 2022 telephone call between Zurab Abashidze and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin was published. The two discussed a transport corridor between Russia and Georgia, including a route Karasin placed "to the left of South Ossetia", and Russian readiness to build the access infrastructure for it. A channel described as technical was handling a project with clear geopolitical weight.[1]

Abashidze was replaced by Giorgi Kajaia in March 2024. The post then stood empty from December 2025 until October 2026.

Kobakhidze set out three priorities for the new representative. Peaceful resolution of the conflict, trade and economic relations, and a standing humanitarian dialogue. He did not say whether the mandate now formally includes conflict resolution, and he stated that Geneva would continue alongside the bilateral channel.[2]

Two readings are possible. Tbilisi is either restoring a mechanism for managing practical business with Moscow, or it is building a political channel for negotiations that have so far run through an international forum. The government has not said which.

2. WHAT IT MEANS

Russia's interest in South Caucasus connectivity gives the channel an added weight. The precedent is the 2011 agreement on customs administration and the monitoring of trade in goods, negotiated through Swiss mediation as part of Russia's WTO accession. It set up monitoring for three trade corridors. Karasin later read its provisions as defining Georgia's customs borders near Zugdidi and Gori, which would imply that Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region are separate entities. The text does neither of those things. It does not mention the occupied regions and it does not define Georgia's customs space along their administrative boundaries. Georgia's claim to authority over its recognised territory survived the agreement.[3]

Moscow's current interest runs beyond the Larsi crossing. The 2022 call already turned on alternative routes. In February 2026 Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk said Moscow was considering the restoration of railway communication with Georgia through occupied Abkhazia. Georgian Railway replied that no such project was under consideration on its side.[4]

Rail links through occupied Abkhazia would raise questions a technical agenda cannot carry. Who administers customs, whose regulations apply, whose jurisdiction the line runs under. Without answers on paper, restored links would normalise Russian control of the territory and add a further layer of economic and political dependence.

The second risk concerns the Geneva International Discussions themselves. Moscow has questioned Geneva as a venue and pushed for relocation, Minsk among the options, in line with its wider interest in reducing Western involvement. Georgian Dream figures have called the format ineffective. Its thin record has a different cause. Russia has not fulfilled the obligations it took on in the 2008 ceasefire. Geneva nonetheless remains the only international forum co-chaired by the EU, the UN and the OSCE in which Russian troop withdrawal, the non-use of force and the return of displaced persons are on the agenda.

Three differences separate the two formats. Geneva keeps Russia's ceasefire obligations at the centre, while a bilateral track lets Moscow recast the conflict as a dispute between Tbilisi and the authorities in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. Geneva keeps Western actors in the room, while an

expanded Prague channel would push them out at the moment Georgia's leverage is weakest. And Geneva holds Russia to commitments it has already made, while a bilateral track exposes Georgia to Moscow's standing demands for non-use-of-force agreements with the occupied regions and for the delimitation of so-called borders, without putting the occupation itself in question.

Weakening Geneva would not resolve the conflict. It would remove the mechanism through which Georgia defends its position.

The third risk is domestic. Georgian Dream leaders increasingly place responsibility for the outbreak of the August 2008 war on the previous Georgian government. This is not only party competition. Moscow has argued for years that the war was a consequence of Georgian aggression, which pushes its own military intervention, its recognition of the occupied regions and its continued military presence out of view.

The reframing has moved from rhetoric into procedure, through the parliamentary investigation and through the use of the 2008 war in the constitutional proceedings against opposition parties.

International findings run the other way. In its Grand Chamber judgment in *Georgia v. Russia (II)* of 21 January 2021 the European Court of Human Rights established Russia's effective control over Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the buffer zone after active hostilities ceased, and held Russia responsible for violations committed during the occupation that followed.[5] A domestic political verdict on a former government cannot undo those findings or lift Russia's obligations.

The danger lies in the combination. A state narrative that shifts responsibility towards Tbilisi reinforces Moscow's account of the war. An expanded bilateral channel gives Moscow the venue in which to press its demands. Together they hand Russia leverage it has sought for years.

3. WHAT TO WATCH

Four developments will show which path the government has taken. The first is the mandate, and whether Zurabashvili stays with practical questions or is formally given political negotiations about the occupied regions. The second is Geneva, and whether Georgia defends the format's central role and its international co-chairs or lets the bilateral track hollow it out. The third is transport, and how Tbilisi answers Russian proposals for rail links through occupied Abkhazia and for alternative corridors. The fourth is the domestic track, and whether the government's account of the 2008 war hardens into institutional or legal decisions that weaken Georgia's position abroad.

The timing matters. Georgia's estrangement from its Western partners coincides with a Russian push to consolidate influence in the South Caucasus through political pressure, economic connectivity and demands for a new regional security arrangement. A channel built under these conditions does not start from equality.

If the Prague format becomes a substitute for internationally mediated negotiations, and if domestic politics keeps eroding Georgia's own position on 2008, the country enters a phase of asymmetric bargaining with Moscow. That is the outcome Russia has worked towards for years. It moves the conflict off the international agenda of occupation and ceasefire obligations and onto a table where Moscow holds every advantage.

Elevating direct channel risks shifting core sovereignthy issues from an established international framework into asymmetric bilateral bargaining with Moskow.

NOTES

[1] "ახალი გზა სამხრეთ ოსეთიდან მარცხნივ და ტანგო ორისთვის — რას და როგორ განიხილავენ აბაშიძე და კარასინი" [A New Road to the Left of South Ossetia, and a Tango for Two. What Abashidze and Karasin Discuss, and How], *Radio Tavisupleba*, 2 February 2023, https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32253037.html.

[2] "First Deputy FM Zurabashvili Becomes Prime Minister's Special Representative for Relations With Russia," *Civil Georgia*, 21 October 2026, https://civil.ge/archives/755468.

[3] Mariam Grigalashvili and Levan Kakishvili, "ქართულ-რუსული შეთანხმების რუსული ინტერპრეტაცია და რეალური ფაქტები: სად ცდება კარასინი?" [The Russian Interpretation of the Georgian-Russian Agreement and the Real Facts. Where Karasin Goes Wrong], *Netgazeti*, 8 February 2018, https://netgazeti.ge/news/251126/.

[4] "Russia Considers Restoring Rail Links with Georgia via Abkhazia," *Civil Georgia*, 13 February 2026, https://civil.ge/archives/721232.

[5] European Court of Human Rights, *Georgia v. Russia (II)* [GC], Application No. 38263/08, judgment, 21 January 2021, https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-207757.

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