

# One year after the Georgian-Russian August war

*Letter from Tbilisi*

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## Anniversary visits

It was not by chance that they came to Tbilisi almost exactly one year after the five-day August war between Georgia and Russia. Sweden's foreign minister Carl Bildt led an EU troika on 17-18 July. He was followed the week after by US Vice President Joe Biden.

On their way from the airport, they both passed a giant poster of a smiling George W. Bush, who had also given his name to the broad avenue leading into Georgia's capital. Here, like in Israel, the former president was seen as an unconditional ally.

Biden did not leave the capital, where he was given a warm welcome by President "Misha" Saakashvili, who repeatedly referred to the high visitor as "Joe, my friend" and awarded him one of Georgia's highest medals - St. Georgia's Victory Order.

Had the vice president had time to visit the town of Gori, which was occupied by Russian troops during the 2008 War, he would not have seen a George W. Bush poster but statues, pictures, photos and a museum, all remembering the town's "favorite son", Joseph Stalin.

Carl Bildt, on the other hand, left Tbilisi to travel to Western Georgia, close to Abkhazia, to visit the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Zugdidi and settlements for IDPs (internally displaced persons) who had to flee in the thousands last year from their homes in the now Russian dominated Abkhazia.

During his visit, Bildt was confronted with the news that Georgia, in a declaration by Eka Tkeshelashvili, the secretary of Georgia's National Security Council, wanted to "broaden the monitoring mission", which consists of 246 unarmed civilians, "to include the United States and other non-union members", which would make it "politically very costly to Russia to do anything on the ground."

The Swede wisely commented that such a dramatic change must be discussed by member states and the institutions in Brussels, including the European Parliament. Ten days later, on

27 July, the EU extended the EUMM for another year. But the EU did not discuss the possibility of other countries, including the United States, joining the mission. Participation of non-EU countries will be discussed in the autumn, an EU official told Reuters.

The Georgian president tried to make the best out of the visit of his “friend Joe”, but Biden’s remarks were balanced and did not offend the leaders of Misha’s staunch opposition. The American words of solidarity were more in support of Georgia’s democratisation and sovereignty than of the president personally:

“You are *in the process* [emphasis added] of building those institutional attributes that the country needs to maintain democracy”, said Biden. “Many other people in the world are looking to you to see whether or not you can bring the [Rose] Revolution to full fruition and plant those roots of democracy very deep”, he said. “*In a sense, some of the real hard part is now left* (emphasis added).”

Biden also almost seemed to question the generous support to the country given by the Bush administration, or at least wanted to calm down further expectations in his official speech: “All in all, Georgia today is one of the highest per-capita recipients of U.S. aid in the entire world. Even where I come from, a billion dollars for 5 million people is a lot of money”, he remarked, then adding a piece of advice: “It is a sad certainty, but it is true there is no military option for reintegration.”

The vice president finally supported the need for national unity in the face of threats: “Show them the real benefits of your nation’s motto: Strength is in unity. Divided, Georgia will not complete its journey.”

On 30 July, one week after the visit, the independent Georgian news site Civil.ge quoted the Pentagon: “A US Defence Department official said Georgia was not ready for weapons acquisition, the issue pushed by President Saakashvili before Vice President Biden’s visit to Tbilisi.”

## Georgia’s war

Visiting Georgia for the first time leaves me with two firm impressions.

On the one hand, there are two looming clouds over Georgia – Russia and the global financial crisis – and yet, instead of joining forces against these very concrete threats, the politicians fight each other. On the other hand, inadequate economic and political support is given to the citizens of Georgia, whose basic needs do not seem to be a priority of the government. The lack of conditionality and transparency in foreign assistance is also a matter of concern in this context.

Many of my conversations dealt with these concerns.

One essential point stands out: the August war meant a radical shift in domestic and foreign policy, and for the economic and social situation in Georgia. Who started the war remains a hot issue. However, few foreign observers, including diplomats in Tbilisi, and the overwhelming majority of the political sphere outside the cabinet offices, dispute the Wikipedia account:

“During the night of 7 to 8 August 2008, Georgia launched a large-scale military attack against the self-proclaimed Republic of South Ossetia. The 1991–1992 South Ossetia War between Georgians and Ossetians had left most of South Ossetia under de facto control of a Russian-backed internationally-unrecognised regional government.”

For the former speaker of the parliament and now the outspoken leader of Democratic Movement–United Georgia, Nino Burjanadze, the war changed everything: “Georgia and all

of us are now losers. We lost the 20% of our territory, not to speak of the many casualties and IDPs. We have no investments and no tourism. And the road to NATO is blocked. It will stay that way as long as Misha is in power. Russian veto of UN mission in the Security Council is another proof of that we are lost (sic)."

The 81-year old former general secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, Edvard Sjervardnadze, who became Gorbachev's (and the Soviet Union's last) foreign minister and launched the *Sinatra doctrine*, which expressed the right of the Soviet satellite countries to choose their own political system, also blames Saakashvili: "If we had wanted to avoid the war, we should not have started it", he said in an interview on 18 August 2008.

Sjervardnadze also has other reasons to be critical. Having won the presidential elections in 1995 with 70% of the votes, he was forced in 2003, after long and massive demonstrations, to resign by the "Rose Revolution" and was succeeded by Saakashvili.

He nevertheless argues that Moscow's hegemonic policies in the Caucasus have not changed since Empress Katarina the Great. This time, however, with the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he believes that they may have gone too far. "Look at Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia. Maybe one day the Ossetians and Abkhazians will try the same thing."

Irrespective of the wide criticism of "Misha's war", nobody in Georgia supports the Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, nor does any political group defend Moscow's overall policies. The EU Council's *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia* on the origins of the August war is, however, much awaited. Its chair is Heidi Tagliani of Switzerland, former UN head of mission in Georgia. The mission was initially expected to table conclusions by 31 July, but it has requested two more months.

## Institutions still weak

Biden's call for unity echoed the frustration felt by Georgia's friends abroad. In an unusual joint statement, on 25 May, the United States and European Union had called on the Georgian authorities and the opposition to get their act together: "The United States and the European Union urge Georgia's government and opposition to end the current stalemate on the streets and begin negotiations immediately and without preconditions on a new program of reforms to invigorate Georgia's democracy", the statement read.

"We call on all Georgians to respect the rule of law, abide by Georgia's Constitution, avoid violence, and honour the right of peaceful protest. The European Union and the United States pledge our full support for all such efforts aimed at strengthening Georgia's democratic freedom and prosperity, and reiterate our unyielding support for Georgia's independence and territorial integrity."

I asked the former Georgian UN ambassador and now leader of the opposition party "Alliance for Georgia", Irakli Alasania, what concessions he would ask from the President in order to reach a compromise. He answered that parliamentary elections were the real goal for him - insisting that Saakashvili's resignation was a non-starter - plus the two points in his six-point proposal that the president so far has not accepted: electoral reform (including chairmanships of parliamentary committees) and non-interference by police and security forces in local constituencies. To create a proper electoral environment, steps had to be taken to remedy the situation of the media, which was by then dominated by pro-government circles.

Three weeks after our meeting, on 30 June, Alasania issued a statement saying that the ongoing street protests were now "entering a new phase", whereby there should be a greater focus "on political process and a dialogue". He added that he and his political associates would present

amendments to the constitution.

Even the president's supporters acknowledge that Georgia's democracy is flawed. "I defend him because he leads the first democratic government, and the most effective one ever had in our country", a well-known academician explained. "Misha is a democrat but using forceful and not always democratic means in a post-Soviet and pre-democratic environment."

A former minister was harsher: "After the Rose Revolution many foreign investors came and bought property. They saw democracy and rule of law. But what I see today is mainly a change of ownership and no substantive benefit for the country. And Georgian democracy is still only a label without contents. The president runs an authoritarian regime."

A member of a human rights organisation agreed. Saakashvili was not taking human rights seriously. Asking for his resignation, however, was a non-starter. After all, he was democratically elected. But, especially after having had a war, the president should talk to the opposition and do something about the ridiculous situation in parliament where the opposition holds 9 out of 150 seats. Accepting new elections to parliament could be a way out. He must also do something about impunity. Masked goons are beating up peaceful demonstrators. This must stop.

## Stalin nostalgia

Coming back to Stalin, why is it that the dead dictator is still respected by many Georgians, mainly from the older generation? And why do many people believe or say that it was better before, meaning both during the Soviet period and the Sjervardnadze rule?

I was given some answers in a village of some hundred inhabitants north of Gori, Stalin's birthplace, and situated only some 15 kilometres from occupied South Ossetia. In a town-hall meeting in the only country store, citizens, several of them obviously still traumatised by the war, expressed fear of being attacked, occupied and looted again by the Russians, while complaining that they had received nothing from the government and had not seen any foreign aid organisation again since last year.

And yet, the paradox inherent in both statements seemed to be before my eyes: they feared a new Russian attack but the country store displayed a huge painting of Joseph Stalin. And on the entrance door a huge poster was hanging proclaiming that USAID had been there handing out goods. But that was a year ago. Now, none of the destroyed tractors had been replaced for the harvest, and the sewer system in the middle of the village was broken and open, stinking, destroying gardens, killing apple trees and threatening public health. And Stalin, yes he was from our region but he also saved us from the Nazis.

In two villages some hours south of the former Soviet favourite spa of Borjomi, I got answers to the nostalgic syndrome of "it was better before". Travelling on bumpy unrepaired roads for hours before reaching forgotten villages reminded me of Africa. People seemed to lack everything and expressed resigned hopelessness. "Before we had a central place for collecting and distributing vegetables, milk and fruits", the mostly female population complained. "And kindergarten, health service and a school." "How do you see your future here?", we asked – "In ten years time the village will be dead and only a few old people will be left."

## Europe must support reform

In a wider political sense, Irakli Alasania suggested that there are two things the West could and should do. One is for the West to send a crystal-clear message to Russia about non-interference and to say no to the occupation of the third of the territory that they have invaded. The other is to consolidate democracy in Georgia. In this regard, the EU and the US must send a crystal-clear message to Saakashvili and others who do not favour sitting down at the negotiation table and

reaching compromises. Alasania also said that the western partners should be “monitors” of potential agreements that might be reached between the authorities and the opposition so as to guarantee the implementation of those agreements.

Biden picked up the theme of “winning back the lost territories within Georgia’s own borders” in his speech in Tbilisi: “Only a peaceful and prosperous Georgia has the prospect of restoring its territorial integrity... by showing those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia... a Georgia where they can be free and enjoy autonomy... within a federal system of government, where life can be so much better for them than it is now”.

For the greatest donor, the European Commission, whose assistance to Georgia from 1992-2006 amounted to almost €506 million and from where assistance is still forthcoming, the question of transparency and conditionality should be raised more seriously.

In a study financed by George Soros of the Open Society Foundation, former minister of finance Vladimer Papava delivers sharp and well-documented criticism (*Reflection of Donors’ Financial Aid within the Framework of Brussels Conference Decisions in the 2008 and 2009 State Budgets of Georgia*, Tbilisi, April 2009).

The Brussels conference came up with over four billion dollars, of which two billion was in grants. No other country has received as much as this in the current global economic crisis, writes Papeva. But there has not been enough transparency and accountability in Georgia, and no real control from the donor community. The role of parliament as watchdog was also minimal, given the strong government majority, he argues.

Donor organisations I met in the field complained that too much assistance was given in a blank cheque to big government projects, such as infrastructure and buildings, money invested that never trickled down to the villages and people in need. The houses in the IDP settlements, built with EU money, were often cited as poor in standard (no water and sanitation) and bad in design (no land to cultivate for the men who were mostly farmers). Agricultural development and a serious IDP plan should therefore be a priority.

Georgia is a truly wonderful country, with a rich culture and history, abundant in good food, excellent wines and potentially unique ecotourism. The Georgians deserve a much better deal.

In the FRIDE policy brief published in June 2009, “The EU and Georgia’s turmoil”, the two authors, Balazs Jarabik and Tornike Sharashenidze, raise the question of democracy and donors’ support by stating that Saakashvili’s government has “failed to strike a balance between democracy and national security concerns. Tbilisi has only sought to wave the European flag rather than adopting European values in a deep-rooted fashion.” They thus argue that the EU should be more assertive in promoting its values and benefits.

I could not agree more.

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