

# Georgia and Russia: a short war with a long aftermath

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What started as a provoked assault by Georgia against the separatist regime of South-Ossetia quickly developed into a short armed conflict between Russia and Georgia. The Georgians had miscalculated when they attacked South Ossetia's capital, Tskhinvali, while Russia took the conflict to another level by bombing and invading Georgia proper. After one week a joint EU, US and OSCE-brokered six-point peace plan was agreed between Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev. The main points come down to stopping military action; access for humanitarian aid; the return of Georgian troops to their barracks; the return of Russian troops to their pre-conflict positions; and international talks about security in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. As developments continue to unfold regarding the implementation of the plan, there are a number of consequences that can be discerned from this rude awakening to war in Europe: these include consequences for Georgia and Russia, but also for the Caucasus region and in a broader context for international actors - foremost the EU and US - and international organisations, mainly NATO and the OSCE.

## Georgia's losses

Since Saakashvili came to power Georgia has been looking to change the status quo of the frozen conflicts - altering the format of mediation and negotiations - in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The only successful result of the war for Georgia is that Russia will never again be seen as an impartial mediator in the conflicts. Although Russia will safeguard the South Ossetians and Abkhaz people, who have been given Russian passports over the last few years, its mission is unlikely to garner international recognition.

The negative consequences for Georgia, mainly the result of a gamble by President Saakashvili, are numerous. The future of the President has become highly uncertain. The main reason for the slow Russian withdrawal from Georgia is its hope of a revolt within the country and its leadership. Whereas the people initially felt attacked by Russia and supported their President they might over time see Saakashvili as the instigator of the disaster. The first loss for Georgia is its international reputation. Although Georgia received strong Western support, mainly from the US, President Saakashvili exposed himself too much through the broadcast media during the conflict; his interviews were not structured or logical, blatantly pushing Georgia as a victim and making exaggerated accusations about ethnic cleansing. His young team of ministers was nowhere to be seen on TV. Moreover, the West has chosen to largely ignore the fact that Georgia started the conflict. A rocket attack on a region you consider part of Georgia, that harbours a substantial Georgian population mixed with Ossetians, is not the way to win hearts and minds. After the dust has settled Georgia's Western friends may conclude that support

for the country is in their strategic interest but that they are unhappy with Saakashvili's track record and uncontrolled behaviour. In this sense substantial Western support for the further development of democratic institutions and practice should precede and be disconnected from blind support for Georgia's democratically elected leader.

Second, Georgia has lost Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russians are right in arguing that these regions are now less likely than ever to rejoin Georgia. Russia has given support to both regions for over 15 years and made them into what they are today; de facto states that are economically dependent on Russia and receive the Kremlin's full support. Interestingly, Russia currently argues that it cannot fully recognise Georgia's territorial integrity as a result of this war. A similar conclusion was reached by most EU member states and the US in the case of the conflict between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs. Whereas the international community (largely excluding Russia) invested extensive funds and effort for eight years in bringing both parties in the Balkans together, before giving up on reunification, Russia has immediately drawn the conclusion that Abkhaz and Ossetians can't live together with Georgians after this conflict. This makes Russia's "international law" objection to Kosovo's independence seem somewhat awkward.

Third, the damage to Georgia's infrastructure is substantial and will take international help to repair. Russian looting has made things worse. Human suffering is intense with probably over 150,000 Georgians being displaced from their homes and villages. The psychological losses will also be substantial. The Georgian army suffered a quick defeat which will have a backlash on moral for many years to come. Georgia's population feels humiliated by Russia's invasion and relations between both peoples will be strained for decades.

Georgia's democratic credentials have also been damaged. The Georgians had taken big steps towards democracy since the Rose Revolution of December 2003. This process slowed down from 2006 to 2008 when it became clear that Saakashvili had chosen the fruits of establishing rule of law over further development of democracy. The opposition parties remained weak and parliament mostly fulfilled a rubberstamp role. In November 2007 Saakashvili was cornered by allegations of corruption and plotting murder by his former close aide and ex-minister of defence Okruashvili. A protest by the opposition was put down and Saakashvili was able to get little over half the votes in the first round of elections in early January. Results were viewed with doubt by the public and hesitantly accepted as free and fair by international watchdogs. The fact that too much power was vested in the President might lead to Saakashvili's downfall and also Georgia's decline in further democratic development; there are simply not many experienced, well-known and democratically orientated alternatives around. The future of Georgia's democracy is so uncertain that a leader inclined to mend ties with Russia cannot be completely ruled out at this stage. With the exception of the latter scenario, it will be crucial for Western democracy providers to redouble their efforts towards Georgia.

## Russia's position

Russian military action in the Caucasus is no novelty. Russia fought two recent Chechen wars and actively participated in the Georgian civil war and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the 1990s. The Russian spectator is less surprised by the Kremlin's intervention because the Russians have been fighting in the Caucasus almost continuously from the times of Ivan the Terrible to Catherine the Great in conquering the Caucasus mountain and valley people and later fighting for domination in the region against other empires such as the Ottomans.

Russia's gains and losses are more difficult to assess at this stage and need to be considered in a longer-term perspective. The Kremlin's policy in the "near abroad" has been one of maintaining the status quo, including through weakening its neighbours and giving support to separatist entities. Now that this status quo is lost and a frozen conflict has become hot, Moscow felt the time had come for a permanent change of the political landscape. Georgia's President Saakashvili does not fit with Russia's vision of Georgia and the Southern Caucasus. The assertive and pro-Western Georgian President has been at odds with Russia since his rise to power.

Whereas the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia and Russia quickly spread to Abkhazia (the other unrecognised *de facto* state on Georgian territory) in a low-intensity way, no further escalation took place. This would have brought new elements into the conflict, such as a link between Georgia and potential unrest and conflict in the Northern Caucasus. Freedom fighters and Islamic fundamentalists from Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia might also have come to assist Ossetian and Abkhaz fighters, as happened in the early 1990s. The threat of further hostilities and even conflict in the Caucasus is still present. There remains a smaller risk that this conflict might eventually spill over to the other two frozen conflicts in Moldova (Transnistria) and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh). Russia's decision to seize a leadership role in this conflict prevented an escalation to other parts of the Caucasus and beyond.

Russia has achieved an objective in displaying its military might and the decisiveness of its leadership to react swiftly. The price it has to pay for this display of power is likely to outweigh the benefits by far. First, and to Georgia's benefit, Russia will never again be seen as an honest broker in neighbouring countries. It will be difficult for Russia to agree on a new peacekeeping format for South Ossetia; in an ideal situation the UN would send peacekeepers and the EU would dispatch a police force for Abkhazia. More likely, however, is that Russia will stay in South Ossetia indefinitely while Georgia will invite as many Western-orientated observers as possible. Russia's loss of official recognition as a peace-broker might also have implications for the mediation and "peacekeeping" roles it fulfils in Moldova and Azerbaijan. Russian peacekeepers in Moldova can hardly be regarded by anyone as impartial between the separatist leaders of Transnistria (all holding Russian passports) and the Moldovans, while its mediation role between the OSCE and Ukraine will need review. Also, Russia's role in supporting Armenia in the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh may be viewed with more suspicion by other players.

Second, while Russia has sought to show its monopoly over military action in the Caucasus, it is likely to have achieved the opposite result. If Georgia's leadership survives this crisis it is likely to receive even stronger support from the US and the EU, as both are eager to avoid further Russian interference in Georgia; NATO membership might even be forthcoming, probably sooner rather than later. Moreover, as a result of Russian aggression Ukraine will also be more determined to accede to NATO while Azerbaijan and Moldova might seek even closer ties. Meanwhile Georgia will leave the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS),

maybe followed by Ukraine. Although the CIS is not a healthy or influential organisation it is still the foremost mechanism used by Moscow to find common ground with former Soviet republics; CIS will be dead without Ukraine and Georgia. Russia's near abroad might feel more secure in the EU's neighbourhood, and under the NATO umbrella, in the future.

Third, Russia's international reputation has been severely damaged. The Kremlin's display of power will be connected to earlier power political behaviour such as cutting energy deliveries to Belarus and Ukraine, blocking development in the Balkans and aggressive anti-Western rhetoric. Russia might have crossed a line of what is acceptable; its aggressiveness will hurt its long-term interest in developing into an internationally respected power and successful modern economy. Time will show to what length Western powers will go to shame and blame Russia.

While Georgia - or better said Saakashvili - did badly in the media, the Russians have not been much more convincing. War brings atrocities, the loss of life and flows of refugees on both sides - Ossetians to the north and Georgians to the south. But Putin's statements on genocide were mostly propaganda and difficult to believe for Georgians and Ossetians who have been living together for centuries. Also the Prime Minister's aggressiveness towards the US (before substantial US criticism) in blaming and accusing Washington for being part of the cause and interfering was misplaced and unhelpful. There seemed to be a separation of roles where Putin played the "bad cop" and President Medvedev played the "good cop" by stating the military operation was completed at an early stage and ordering a withdrawal. Unfortunately the new Russian President's role in this conflict was subject to that of Putin, since Medvedev's claims of withdrawal from Georgia proper were ignored on several occasions.

## The international community and Western institutions

Besides the question over whether this conflict could have been avoided, given Georgian warnings over Russian provocation and the International Crisis Group's alert, the reaction to the war was reasonably quick. This is particularly notable when the summer period and the start of the Olympic Games are taken into account. The main states and organisations with an interest in Georgia and relations with Russia reacted in a reasonably well-coordinated fashion; the French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner (presiding over the EU Council) and his Finish colleague Alexander Stubb, who is chairing the OSCE, adopted a concerted approach by shuttling between Tbilisi and Moscow, quickly followed by French President Sarkozy and US representatives. Now that a ceasefire has been signed and Russia is seemingly ignoring the six-point peace plan by dragging its feet on withdrawal from Georgia proper (foremost a unrecognised buffer zone on Georgian territory), strong unity is important. The conflict will have a long-term impact on the states and organisations involved, however.

Firstly the UN, that is the main international mechanism in Abkhazia, has been of little use in this conflict. The Security Council could not come to a resolution or even statement within the first two weeks after the start of the conflict. This is a situation that has occurred in the past when one of the five veto holding nations is directly involved. More worrying was the Cold War rhetoric between Russia and Western members. Naturally talks within the UN regarding restructuring the Security Council will need to be carried forward as a matter of urgency.

The OSCE, that fulfils the main international mechanism in South Ossetia, failed in two of its core tasks - conflict prevention and early warning. The members of the OSCE will need to drastically rethink the purpose and *modus operandi* of the organisation, which has been troubled both by Russian obstruction of its human dimension and Western neglect of its security aspects. The

Georgian war is likely to affect the OSCE most severely. The moment of truth seems to have arrived for the OSCE this year. Next to in-fighting between Russia and several former Soviet states on the one hand and the rest of the members on the other, the OSCE is the primary international player in three of the four frozen conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The Finish Chairmanship might want to prepare a long-overdue OSCE (Helsinki-) summit with several grand themes this year. First the frozen conflicts need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The OSCE still has the advantage of broad membership that includes all North American, European and Eurasian states. Second, the current war has brought the OSCE to a point where it will need to decide on its future in order to remain relevant. Perhaps a clear break should be made by setting up a grand security forum based on current membership and commitments (something that Russia aspires to) while establishing a second organisation that would focus specifically on human dimension issues such as election monitoring and human rights (the emphasis of the Western members). Also, in the latter case, politically-binding commitments should remain in place. Experiences since 2000 within the OSCE and the current Georgian conflict seem to militate against the current all-enveloping holistic approach to security that incorporates human and economic dimensions.

The EU will need to act as one and decide if the Southern Caucasus is part of Europe or if the region should be considered part of Russia's backyard. What is the assistance and diplomacy-orientated European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) worth in this new light? German chancellor Merkel argued a few days after the conflict began that the ENP needed rethinking but also broadening to Central Asia. Meanwhile the EU's energy interests in Georgia are substantial; the BTC oil pipeline and BTE gas pipeline that run from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey are essential to Europe's energy security. In that sense neither the EU nor the US will be able to give up on Georgia. Most likely, the differences of approach among the EU members towards Russia will become more apparent. The UK and new Central and East European members will opt for a harsh stance arguing that a line has been crossed by Russia; trust has evaporated and Russia needs to choose between its aggressive power politics approach and a real partnership with the EU that is based on interdependence. Other members led by Germany and France argue that exclusion will lead to further distancing Russia and, as a result, greater insecurity for both. The internal dialogue will make Brussels a weak player, easily influenced by Russian policy. The first internal discussion within the EU Council will be the question of whether Brussels can continue the talks with Moscow on a new partnership agreement that began last July. A more urgent point of attention would be getting the European Security and Defence Policy moving on the ground in Georgia and hopefully the frozen conflict areas. This would be more likely through a police mission than military involvement.

Such a division over relations with Russia also threatens NATO, although significant ramifications have been avoided so far. During the Bucharest summit of April this year the Membership Action Plan was withheld from Georgia and Ukraine because many members wanted to see more proof of reform or did not want to aggravate Russia. To find agreement both countries were told they would have to wait but that they would eventually become members. This position will remain unchanged and might become a top priority for the alliance. Implications of the war for NATO-Russia relations will be severe, with NATO stating that it "can't be business as usual"; a suspension of co-operation through the NATO-Russia Council is most likely. While NATO wisely opted not to play a high-profile role in the early days of the conflict, and left this to the EU and OSCE instead, the political-military organisation might fare well on this matter. Where NATO has tried to extend its interests and the objectives of collective security in defence of transatlantic democracies to North Africa and the Middle East it has not been very successful. Even the operations in Afghanistan have not changed NATO's main geographical focus, which

remains the former Soviet Union states and the Balkans to a lesser extent. A return to Cold War relations will not occur but NATO efforts to boost and reinvent its successful Partnership for Peace programme, that seeks political and military cooperation with all non-members in the Euro-Atlantic area including Eurasia, is likely to be strengthened.

Relations between the United States and Russia have also been damaged. It was mainly the US that has reacted in clear terms and took a leading role in urging Russia to stop its offensive in Georgia. The US will not accept compromising Georgia's sovereignty or territorial integrity and Washington has vowed to help the country get back on track. The focus will most likely be placed on democracy promotion, since the US constantly emphasises the Georgian "democratically elected government". It is unclear if the US will still argue that membership of NATO (and the EU) would need to precede democracy instead of the other way around (as argued by the majority of Europeans). The US seems determined not to let Russia easily get away with its unilateral invasion. A first measure taken to demonstrate that Moscow's view can be ignored was the immediate signing of the US missile defence base plan with Poland. It is unlikely to be the last US measure that will aggravate Moscow.

## Conclusion

The brief but devastating war between Georgia and Russia will have many consequences for the parties involved and for international relations in general. Georgia's road to democracy (including NATO membership and its increasing links with the EU) has been severely derailed and the future of the small South Caucasus state is unclear. Pending full Russian withdrawal from the "buffer zone" and an absence of further hostilities two main questions will stand central in the coming months.

The first question that will need to be dealt with decisively is who will help rebuild South Ossetia and Georgia as a whole? Will Russia work in South-Ossetia and Western countries in Georgia proper, or can a joint effort be undertaken? Rebuilding Georgia and South Ossetia's destroyed buildings and infrastructure will only be a minor part of a long-term engagement in the South Caucasus that will take extensive international coordination and billions of euros and roubles.

Second, how to internationally move forward on talks to resolve the South Ossetian and the Abkhaz conflict. Georgia, South Ossetia, Russia and the OSCE have not been able to come to an agreement over the course of 15 years while the situation has now become more urgent but also more complex. A standoff between Russia and the West in Georgia can be avoided if both parties look for a solution to the Abkhaz and South Ossetia issues that is creative in dealing with statehood and acceptable to the people on the ground. A solution that would keep Georgia's full territorial integrity in place but offers internationally recognised sovereignty to both regions (that will maintain non-territorial links with Russia) might be an acceptable way to resolve these conflicts.

The development of democratic and liberal societies in the former Soviet space now looks more uncertain than ever. Even their development as independent states seems at risk and the threat of war has not passed. Attention and investment to the development of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia will remain a priority for many organisations and countries for decades to come.

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