



REP Roundtable Summary

Where does Georgia go from here?

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I will start by discussing the circumstances leading up to the war. I will then move on to evaluate Georgia's position, internally and internationally.

What were the interests and assumptions of the major players in this conflict? Russia believes that Georgia is an American project to extend its strategic influence at Russia's expense. Russia's objectives in the recent conflict with Georgia were: to punish Georgia for seeking NATO membership; to demonstrate to other states the risks of aligning with NATO; to humiliate the national government in Tbilisi, and at least indirectly effect regime change in Georgia; to underline Russia's strength and reassert its ability and right to keep the whole of the South Caucasus within its sphere of influence.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia were not pursuing a project of their own in this war. They are concerned about their security and status, but they don't have effective freedom of manoeuvre to pursue an agenda that wouldn't be entirely coordinated by Moscow.

From Georgia's perspective, we continue to be committed to the principle of territorial integrity. However, the recent conflict was a war for Georgia as a whole, not South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It was about maintaining and defending Georgia's effective sovereignty, the right of the Georgian people to pursue our national project as we see fit. In this context, it is important to affirm that for us, the goal of joining the European and Euro-Atlantic community, which annoys Russia so much, is not only about our security and economic benefit, but primarily about upholding our identity and values.

Of course, Western support is vital to us. One of the main challenges for the Georgian Government is how to retain its international credibility. In this context the question of who started the war is extremely important. The dominant discourse attacks Russia for its disproportionate response, but is also critical of Georgia for its allegedly rash and immature actions. The very language of "disproportionate response" suggests that Georgia did something seriously wrong and some kind of military response from Russia would be legitimate. Of course, we are not happy about this. The first pictures of the conflict which were broadcast internationally were of Georgian forces bombing Tsinkhvali. There is a theory that President Saakashvili hoped to catch Russia sleeping, that the attention of the world would be distracted by the Olympics. If this were the case, then the critique of Georgia would be justified. But it is *not* the case. Georgia was not planning to go to war. For more than a year the possibility of war had been discussed, but this was only because we saw that Russia wanted it, not because the Georgian Government sought it. There was a legitimate fear that, since economic

sanctions against Georgia had clearly failed, Russia would try to provoke a military conflict in order to discredit and fatally weaken the Georgian government, thus causing regime change. Everybody in Georgia understood that a war could not be to Georgia's benefit. For this reason, we strongly support an independent investigation to establish a precise chronology of events leading up to the conflict. We favour complete transparency on this. Today, an article in the *New York Times* reported that whilst there is not yet conclusive proof that Russia started the war, some indications that this is the case are starting to emerge. We want to be absolved from the suggestion that we acted rashly in bombing Tsinkhvali.

Part of the reason why many western friends of Georgia are critical of Georgia's behaviour during the war is that the crisis exposed problems in Russian-Western relations that had been there a long time, but it was more comfortable to turn a blind eye to. Now it is much more difficult to ignore that the Russian political elite views the West as an adversary, not a partner, and is ready to act against western interests as soon as it sees an opportunity for this. This does force the West to rethink its relations with Russia. That is uncomfortable but no longer avoidable.

What are the challenges for Georgia going forward? One is to deepen relations with the West. As I said, we have to restore the credibility of the Government and overcome the stereotype that we are somehow a reckless and immature government. We must continue our integration into Western institutions such as NATO and the EU. We want MAP, we want a free trade agreement with the EU and the US. If there are no developments in that direction, it means that the Russian aggression has paid off and gets tacit encouragement.

Reconstruction is another big challenge. Assuming Russia will keep its promise to withdraw at least from what it calls the "buffer zones" (that is Georgian territories outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia) in the first half of October, there will still be up to 30,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) from the conflict areas where ethnic cleansing has recently occurred and people will be unable or unwilling to return. These people have to be supported and the government will do this. But one should not forget that we also have about 230,000–240,000 longer-term IDPs from the wars in early 1990s. While the government takes care of the needs of the recent refugees, greater efforts have to be undertaken to support that much larger group as well, unless we want to provoke greater social tensions.

The damage to infrastructure is serious but not devastating. The much greater economic problem is that the conflict will create difficulties in attracting investment. Prime Minister Lado Gurgidze has done a great job in maintaining a functioning banking system in this time of crisis. But he is not a miracle worker. Restoring investor and consumer confidence will take time. In that sense, developing more beneficial trade regimes with EU and the United States will be extremely important.

The third set of challenges is linked to maintaining internal stability and developing democratic institutions at the same time. In that sense, it is crucial that the opposition is active, that it asks all the relevant questions (also about the war) and proposing its own ways of solving the problems. But, at the same time, the processes should be kept within constitutional limits.

The opposition is in a difficult position. It is very difficult to situate oneself in opposition to the Government whilst the Russian leaders publicly say they expect the 'wise' Georgian people to remove its current leadership. So far, the opposition has been quite careful in not trying to benefit from the difficult situation in a way that would undermine our security and sovereignty. Now it is becoming more active and aggressive – which is only natural – but there are no grounds to expect any internal turmoil. Combining stability with development of robust democratic pluralism is the key for the long-term sustainable development of Georgia. Involvement of the international community in achieving this goal is only welcome.

Discussion

Regarding the question of how the war started, if, as you say, Russia provoked the war, why did Georgia not denounce these actions immediately? The reason initially given for Georgia's intervention in South Ossetia was that the Government was 'restoring constitutional order'. No mention was made of Russia.

There was an extremely confused situation on the night of 7 August. There was a fear that Georgian citizens were under threat and a feeling that the Government could either not defend them, and lose credibility, or make a stand. There were several occasions prior to this when an escalation of violence threatened to spill over into war. Earlier in the day on 7 August there was hope that war could be avoided. At some point the decision was reached that Georgia had to act, or else the situation would not stop but only worsen.

Was there a cabinet meeting on 7 August to discuss the decision to go to attack?

I can only tell you my schedule for the day. I was due to have a meeting at 6pm with the Prime Minister to discuss the education budget. It was cancelled at 5pm. No cabinet meeting was scheduled. As soon as it became clear that something serious was going on, a meeting of the Security Council was called. This took place some time mid or late afternoon. I'm not part of that Council, so I can't give you details about it.

Do you feel that the West let you down, and didn't offer necessary support in the early days?

We are a small nation in conflict with a big country. We appreciate we are in an ambiguous situation. We seek and welcome Western support, but we understand that other powers have their own interests and concerns. There was a certain disappointment about the initial reaction in the US and Europe. After two or three days the situation changed, a high level of political and economic support was offered, and that did make a difference. We also want the western support to be as robust as possible. But we are also realistic.

How significant do you feel the energy factor was as a cause of the conflict?

Energy is a very important factor, but one should not reduce everything to this issue only. Russia sees energy issues as secondary to geopolitical ones. Energy is not about doing business, it's about creating leverage to put pressure on the West. If you can achieve regime change in Georgia and make it a satellite state, you can increase your leverage on Europe. It is the existence of Georgia as a genuinely independent nation that is provocative to Russia. President Medvedev recently said that Russia should have been invited into NATO in the early 1990s and many problems like this one would have been avoided. Russia feels humiliated by the West, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is a sign of that humiliation.

What are your calculations of the casualty figures from the conflict? Russia reported immediately after the bombing of Tsinkhvali that 2,000 people had died. This is unlikely; aid agencies tend to expect a ratio of one death to three injured people, and the numbers admitted to hospitals did not support the Russian figures.

On the Georgian side, we count about 300 hundred dead (both civilian and military); this figure may increase somewhat but greater as we have fuller information. We do not have access to the zones of conflict so it is difficult to

assess casualties there, but it is certainly in hundreds at the most, rather than thousands. For instance, on 14 August, Human Rights Watch was speaking about 44 dead and 273 wounded on the Ossetian side. On the 20 August, the prosecutor general of the Russian Federation spoke of 133 civilian deaths.

Regarding the question of timelines leading up to the conflict, do you have any indication that there were any crisis meetings of the Security Council or Cabinet before 7 August? The Russians claimed recently to have found a plan for a Georgian attack of South Ossetia. It's unlikely they will publish it, however.

There were meetings, of course. There was awareness that the situation was extremely tense and unstable.

Could you say something about the position of ethnic Georgians in the Gali region of Abkhazia? Securing the safety of these people requires the Georgian Government to work with the Abkhaz authorities. Is this possible?

We are concerned about what may happen to them. In particular, we hear that the Abkhaz authorities are imposing harsher language laws now, and try to prevent Georgian pupils from studying Georgian in schools. What they say is you have to accept our rule as we see fit or leave.

There is little possibility for open negotiation. There are, however, channels of negotiation which can be used to discuss specific issues.

NATO accession was supported in a referendum, but any moves towards membership will alienate South Ossetia and Abkhazia even more, and further undermine efforts to reintegrate Georgia. How does one resolve this contradiction? Has the conflict further damaged Georgia's NATO ambitions by further weakening Georgia's territorial integrity?

I don't think the Abkhaz are anti-Western. They are simply dependent on Russia, and that dependence forces them to adopt this position. Their value system is not anti-Western, but they are under immense pressure.

The unresolved territorial conflicts are not the real reason for some NATO members' reluctance to support Georgian membership. If that were the case, there would not be much we could do. But in reality it serves as a pretext to delay Georgian membership indefinitely. If there is a workable security regime between Russia and Georgia then perhaps a way forward could be found.

What are the prospects for conflict resolution now? There has been a failure to engage with the aspirations of the Abkhaz, and that has allowed Russia to get involved. Is now the time for a genuine engagement with Abkhazia?

When President Saakashvili's government came to power, it attempted to change the discourse relating to Abkhaz and South Ossetian issues and to build bridges with Abkhaz and Ossetian communities. There was a hope at one point that you could work with Sergei Bagapsh. But eventually it became clear that in reality Bagapsh did not have the room for manoeuvre to reach an agreement independently. All Georgian diplomatic efforts were refuted on different pretexts. On the other hand, Russia's position changed, she became more openly supportive of the separatists. Things have not improved now. The Abkhaz leadership has even less room to negotiate independently of Moscow.

Following President Sarkozy's shuttle diplomacy, how does the situation stand on dismantling check points? At the high point of Russia's occupation there were 23 of these. Also, what hope is there for deploying international observers where they are really needed, in key areas such as Akhagori?

When I left on Sunday the checkpoints in Poti and Lati were being dismantled. In Mingrelia some are being cleared ahead of schedule. In Gori the timetable is more extended and there is no sign of them being dismantled. Akhagori is a special case. Ethnically, this is basically a Georgian area. My impression is that they have not made up their mind on this. It is very hard to get to Akhagori without passing through Gori.

There are also questions about what will happen in Kodori. They may let some Georgians back to create an alibi against accusations of ethnic cleansing. Eduard Kokoity has said that he won't permit ethnic Georgians back to areas near Tskhinvali as it is too dangerous, but they will be allowed back into Akhagori as it is over the other side of a mountain.

Russia insists it is the decision of the leaderships South Ossetia and Abkhazia whether or not to admit international observers, though of course it is really their decision.

Russia has demanded a non-aggression pact with Georgia. History shows how such pacts are exploited. Are there concerns about how violations of any future agreement will be determined? Do you think the EU observation effort can be built around this?

Non-aggression pacts are dangerous. The region of Akhalkalaki extends almost as far as the main highway. What constitutes a violation under these circumstances? The problem is that Russia has become used to violating Georgia's territory. The presence of EU observers is the best hope we have – at least Russia will have to justify its actions to them.

We expect South Ossetia to essentially be turned into a military base. South Ossetia basically subsisted on smuggling before the conflict – it never had a real economy. Now servicing the base will become its main economic activity. Abkhazia will have some other economic outlets like tourism and agriculture, but it will also be fully dominated by Russia.

How would you evaluate the role of the EU? What are the prospects for Georgia's NATO membership, and what will happen to GUAM?

It is very welcome that there is political will on the EU side to bring Georgia closer. We will see if a Free Trade Agreement is forthcoming, this is very important for us.

On NATO, I heard from a Brussels-based think tank when I was in Belgium that the West's engagement with Georgia should involve more EU, less NATO. I said I like the first part of that suggestion! We want MAP.

As for GUAM, its future will depend on Ukraine. It's as simple as that.

How would MAP have enhanced Georgian security, given that MAP does not mean Article Five? President Medvedev claimed that it would have made no difference to Russian actions if Georgia had MAP.

It's hard to say if MAP would have stopped Russia. The critical issue is the following: do Russians believe that Georgia's integration into the West is irreversible or not? If they believe they can still reverse that process, they act on this assumption, and conflicts like the one in August are more likely.

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