

From Fomenting Secessionist Conflicts to Waging Wars: Russia's Far-reaching Georgia Policies

*Nodar Tangiashvili**

Theme: After a protracted confrontation due to the Russian opposition to the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity, Russia invaded Georgia on 8 August 2008.

Summary: Since the independence of Georgia in 1992, the new State has tried to recover control of the regions of Ajaria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia has always opposed the reintegration of the Georgian regions and supported the pro-Russian or the ethnic separatist movements in order to preserve its influence in the region. For the same reason, Russia has also rejected the entry of Georgia into Western organizations like NATO or the European Union, or the internationalization of the peacekeeping forces in the region. The presence of Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia together with thousands of Russian passport holders gives Russia a great leverage to prevent the negotiated reintegration of both regions to Georgia sovereignty.

This paper analyses the evolution of the events occurred in August 2008 against that background, the pre-conflict tensions, the Russian intervention and the diplomatic initiatives to prevent the Russian occupation of Georgian territory. Under a Georgian perspective, the paper is focused on the South-Ossetia campaign though the military conflict presents further implications for Abkhazia, Georgia, the Caucasus and the international order.

Analysis: Before the Russian invasion of Georgia on 8 August 2008, the situation in the conflict zones in Georgia had been heading towards military confrontation for years. Moscow is largely to be blamed for that. Had Russia been cooperative on Georgian and Western initiatives of internalization of peace processes, desisting from obstructing restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity in full conformity with international law and ethnic minority rights, this war could have been avoided. But Russia used these conflicts for its own imperialistic ambitions.

Georgia's territorial conflicts have been the main point of contention between Russia and Georgia for over a decade. This issue has been marked by several important factors. First of all, Russia has been at fault by backing the separatists. Russia has always propped up the breakaway regimes militarily and used the rights of ethnic minorities as the pretext of bringing its ambitions into action. Georgia became an independent state in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and soon got enmeshed into two secessionist wars with the ethnic separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The pro-independence

* *Advisor on International Relations at the Ministry of Defence of Georgia*

groups were strongly backed by Yeltsin's Russia at that time, but the following Russian leaders have also given political support and military assistance to pro-Russian separatists in order to favour the revival of a new kind of Soviet Union, whether on Georgia's territory or elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

Another factor of Georgia's territorial conflicts also has to do with Russia's institutional domination and the low level of viable international neutral peacekeeping forces which have been missing for 16 years. Russia has used its veto-yielding UN diplomacy, EU-dividing policies and provocations on the ground to prevent internationalization of the conflicts from happening.

Russian intervention in the Georgia-Abkhazian conflict made it impossible to solve it and served as the main hurdle on Georgia's tense relations with Russia. Russia provided military support to the separatists of an ethnic minority - Abkhazians in the secessionist war against Georgians who constituted 60 percent of Abkhazia's population. In 1993, Russia-backed Abkhaz separatists and volunteers from Russia's North Caucasus finally defeated Georgian central authorities, broke away from Georgia and drove out some 300 thousand ethnic Georgians in the campaign of "ethnic cleansing", leaving 10 thousand Georgians dead. Due to Russia's vested interests in Abkhazia, Moscow continued to bolster economic, diplomatic and military ties with Sukhumi. The United Nations, preoccupied with other pressing issues, delegated peacekeeping tasks in Abkhazia to the peacekeeping forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an organization widely perceived to serve the Russian interest of restoring its dominance in the former Soviet Union. After 15 years, the fact that the UN maintained only a small and ineffective observation mission, the United Nations Observers' Mission to Georgia (UNOMIG), without a peacekeeping force of its own, has proved to be counterproductive. From the Georgian perspective, the CIS peacekeeping contingent, staffed by Russian soldiers, and the Moscow-imposed 1994 agreement on ceasefire and separation of forces turned into an effective leverage of influence for the Russian Federation. Over this course of time, there was no lasting peace based on a status solution in accordance with internationally recognized borders of Georgia and international practice, for the Russians would not allow unbiased mediation and peacekeeping.

Since the "Rose Revolution" in 2003, Georgians were equally unhappy with the negotiations and peacekeeping formats in South Ossetia. On the ground peacekeepers deployed came from the Russian Federation, South Ossetia and North Ossetia (part of Russia), standing face to face with Georgian peacekeeping contingent in a Joint Peacekeeping Force, which created grounds for tensions. By the same token, the negotiation format invented by Moscow back in 1992 was increasingly seen as skewed against Georgian interests, because the Joint Control Commission (JCC), which proved to be just a placebo, was formed on the same three versus one formula (negotiators were of Russia, Russia's North Ossetia, and pro-Russian South Ossetia on the one hand, and of Georgia on the other hand). There was no room for truly international and objective mediation. The OSCE Mission representatives and a small number of military observers played only a very limited observing role. Georgia wanted to see the negotiations format changed, believing the JCC could no longer reflect reality, as it neither included other serious international actors, nor did it take into account the voice of pro-Georgian Ossetians. Therefore, in the last couple of years Georgia has placed over the table a plan for replacement of JCC. Tbilisi focused on a so-called "2+2+2 format" whereby players in the talks would include Georgians, Russians, pro-Russian South Ossetian separatists under the leadership of de-facto President Eduard Kokoity, pro-Georgian South Ossetian

leader Dmitry Sanakoyev's administration, the US and the EU. This initiative was strongly rejected both by the breakaway Republic and by Russian diplomats.

Russia refused to realize that there were many Ossetians who agreed to live together with Georgians in a single state. Georgian authorities pushed for demilitarization of the conflict zone and for implementing economic rehabilitation projects. The latter was done with the assistance of OSCE and the EU by the administration of pro-Georgian former separatist leader Dmitry Sanakoyev, elected in 2006 as an alternative President of South Ossetia. In 2007, Sanakoyev was appointed Head of the Provisional Administrative Entity of South Ossetia. This was an alternative government, staffed by formerly separatist ethnic Ossetians and covering South Ossetia's Georgia-controlled parts. They were negotiating with Georgia's central authorities on the autonomous status of South Ossetia with considerable input from the ethnic Ossetian communities living in Georgia.

Thus, Georgia had chosen a three-tiered conflict settlement policy: sidelining the JCC dominated by Russia and their South Ossetian "puppets"; discussing modalities of South Ossetia's autonomous status, based on international practice, with moderate Ossetians; and using "carrots" and "soft power" tactics to contrast the growing prosperity of the Georgian-controlled villages, comprising 40 percent of South Ossetia, with the dim prospects of supporting the regime in Tskhinvali. This later policy possibly aimed to bring about a sort of popular revolt against the corrupt incumbent regime of Eduard Kokoity. However, it was disrupted by permanent military provocations from Kokoity's militia, triggering Georgian response while the Russian peacekeepers were unwilling or unable to put a stop to these events (the greatest clashes took place in the summer of 2004, with dozens dead on the both sides).

The Russians kept providing intense military assistance to the pro-Kremlin regime of Eduard Kokoity (sending military hardware under the guise of "peacekeeping", appointing Russian military and security officers to high positions in South Ossetian government, building a military base in Java, etc.). Again, they resisted, whether directly or indirectly, Georgian and US efforts to internationalize and revitalize peacekeeping and negotiation formats in South Ossetia, and they held out passports en masse to South Ossetians, claiming they were Russian citizens who would be protected by Russia in case Georgian authorities reverted to force against them (the same goes for Abkhazians).

Disagreement on the key issue of internationalisation and Russia's continued militarization of the region served as the tipping point which contributed to the military conflict unleashed on 7 August. Though the war started in South Ossetia, it was rather Abkhazia, biggest of the Georgia's two secessionist regions, which was under most international spotlight recently.

Pre-Conflict Tensions

The Georgian government often describes Russia's actions in Georgia as "provocations". Indeed, given the volatility of the situation in Georgia's breakaway provinces and the increased militarization from both sides, Russia took steps that could at any time trigger a resumption of hostilities, even against both sides desires.

The Kremlin's provocations focused especially on Abkhazia, but this tended to also exacerbate the situation in South Ossetia, allied with Abkhazia. On 6 March 2008, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that Moscow was withdrawing from the CIS regime of sanctions against Abkhazia; this implied that Russia openly rejected

abiding by economic, trade, financial and transport sanctions imposed on Abkhazia in 1996.

The situation became particularly serious after the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo on 18 February and its subsequent recognition by Western states, despite Russia's strong opposition and its warning that this would have destabilizing effects in Southern Caucasus.

Russia intensified its provocations after the NATO Summit in Bucharest on 2-4 April when Germany and France, fearing irritation of Moscow, blocked the granting of MAP to Georgia and Ukraine. NATO allies agreed that in the future the two post-communist countries would become members of the alliance and pledged to re-consider granting them the MAP in December. As Georgians warned, this failure of NATO would serve as a "green light" to Russia to carry on with its bullying. Indeed, on 16 April Vladimir Putin issued instructions to Russian state agencies to maintain contacts with South Ossetian and Abkhazian colleagues by bypassing Georgian authorities.

All this amounted to what Georgian experts called "creeping annexation", which was followed after only three months by military occupation. Later, Russian engineer troops entered Abkhazia to build the railway linking – for humanitarian reasons, as Moscow claimed – which was used for rapid deployment of Russian troops after the war broke out in South Ossetia. The recorded shooting down of a Georgian reconnaissance drone by a Russian fighter jet over Abkhazia this summer also indicated Russia's will to invite Georgia into a military confrontation. Russia unilaterally increased the number of its "peacekeepers". Despite Georgian outcry and international pressure, Russia refused to reverse its actions and even flexed its muscle also in the air. Russian fighter jets entered Georgian airspace while the Secretary of State of the United States, Condoleezza Rice, was visiting Tbilisi in order to urge President Saakashvili to withstand Russian provocations (four Georgian peacekeepers had been detained by South Ossetian de-facto government and Georgia was warning against consequences). The Russians admitted the violation of Georgian airspace and stated that they aimed to "cool hot heads" in Tbilisi.

In South Ossetia, provocations preceding the war also became more frequent. In July, the de facto authorities attempted to assassinate Dmitry Sanakoyev, expecting Tbilisi's response. On 1 August, five Georgian police officers were badly injured in a car explosion in South Ossetia. Mutual firing continued until 7 August with casualties and injuries among Georgian civilians, peacekeepers, but also among South Ossetians. Georgia tried to engage in direct talks with South Ossetian authorities to prevent the growing tensions from escalating into a military confrontation. On 7 August, Georgian State Minister for Reintegration went to the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali to hold direct talks with the de facto separatist government and a Russian envoy, Yuri Popov. However, the Russian negotiator did not show up, alleging that his car had broken down on the way to Tskhinvali, and hence the talks never took place. This meant Moscow did not want to facilitate direct negotiations between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali.

Russia's "NATO Campaign"

The tensions in South Ossetia escalated on 7 August, when Georgian villages were shelled by South Ossetian militia. The bombs fell on houses, killing civilians. In a TV address Georgian President Saakashvili declared a unilateral ceasefire and urged for peaceful talks. Despite the ceasefire, the Ossetian forces not only refused to stop firing, but intensified the attacks. Therefore, at midnight on 8 August a decision was made to

send Georgian troops into Tskhinvali. The operation aimed at taking control of the provincial capital in a short time and at removing the separatist regime eliminating its combating forces. Immediately after this, the Georgian military campaign continued with the crossing of the Georgia-Russia border in South Ossetia by Russia's 58th Army, with over a hundred of tanks, via the Roki Tunnel –which connects South Ossetia with Russia's North Ossetian region. Tbilisi has argued Russian that tanks rolled into Georgia before Tbilisi's retaliation.

Ossetian positions in and around Tskhinvali were shelled with Georgian artillery, and Georgian tanks and air force were also in combat. Georgian government forces briefly brought under control Tskhinvali and many other villages around it. The de facto South Ossetian leader fled to Java. After initially destroying the first columns of Russian troops and hardware, and shooting down a dozen Russian jets, Georgian forces could no longer endure massive inflow of hundreds of Russian hardware, thousands of troops from the Roki tunnel, and counter-attacks by Russian artillery and air force. Georgia withdrew on 8 August from Tskhinvali, and finally on 11 August from the remaining positions in South Ossetia. Russian troops and South Ossetian militias pushed deeper inside into undisputed parts of Georgia, far beyond South Ossetia, committing crimes like looting, burning houses, rape, ethnic cleansing and marauding. Ethnic Georgians started fleeing in their thousands (85,000 in total). Over time, Russian troops and tanks occupied the nearest city of Gori and the central highway – effectively dividing the country into two parts – and destroyed military installations everywhere.

As the war in South Ossetia began, a second front was opened in Abkhazia by Russian and Abkhazian forces. Under pressure from Russian plane bombings, Georgian police units withdrew and ethnic Georgians fled from the Georgia-controlled Upper Kodori gorge in Abkhazia, but 9,000 Russian troops went further to occupy the nearest undisputed city of Zugdidi, the main city-port of Poti, blockading the Black Sea and taking control of the highway and the town of Senaki with a Georgian military base, as well as some other towns all in the West and Mid Georgia.

In parallel, from the first moment Russian fighter jets bombed not only Georgian positions and the retreating Georgian forces in South Ossetia or Abkhazia, but basically every strategic, military and even civilian sites all over Georgia, including the residential quarters of the city of Gori; the international airport and radar stations in the capital, Tbilisi, came under air attack. Hundreds of civilians were killed.

Russian officials accused Georgia of committing "genocide" against Ossetians and justified what they cynically called a "peace enforcement operation" with the events of 1999. It looked like the Kremlin directed a theatrical performance and distributed the roles: Russia was the NATO of 1999, while President Saakashvili, by their script, was Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, South Ossetia being Kosovo. On their side, Georgia and the Western nations have rejected any parallelism between Kosovo and Georgia's breakaway regions. Georgian government representatives dismissed the comparison basically by arguing that in Abkhazia genocide and ethnic cleansing was carried out not against a minority, like in Kosovo, but against the majority of Georgians, so that recognizing its independence would amount to legalizing these crimes.

Diplomatic Reactions

Moreover, Russia's gambits reminded the West of the Soviet incursions in Finland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan. The initial international diplomatic reaction of the West disappointed many Georgians and their president, who perceived a lack of sharpness and actions against the aggressor. US President George W. Bush warned that the US took the situation in Georgia "very seriously" and called for "an end to Russian bombings and return by the parties to the status quo of August the 6th". Later President Bush issued a stronger statement saying "the Cold War was over" and "to begin restoring its place in the world, Russia must respect the freedom of its neighbours". The US decided to send humanitarian aid to Georgia with military vessels and aircrafts, a gesture warmly welcomed by Georgians. Russia's disproportionate reaction was condemned by the Western leaders who rushed to Tbilisi in pledge of humanitarian and reconstruction assistance and to study the situation on the ground.

Georgia's traditional friends from the Baltic States, Sweden and Poland, were especially outspoken in condemning Russia's actions. Lithuania's Foreign Minister flew to Georgia while the country was still under heavy bombing. These countries were also active in calling for a tough EU stance on Russia. The leaders of Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine appeared on the mass rally organized to show Georgia's unity in the capital and addressed the Georgian public with words of support.

France played a crucial role in deescalating the Georgia-Russia crisis. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, currently holding the EU's Presidency, was active in mediating a ceasefire agreement between Tbilisi and Moscow. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb of Finland, currently chairing the OSCE, visited Tbilisi on 11 August and then went on to Moscow. They called for the halt to hostilities. A six-point ceasefire agreement was finally hammered out on 15-16 August in Paris's shuttle diplomacy, after Georgian leader signed it unenthusiastically. President Sarkozy kept calling the President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, to ensure Moscow's compliance with the ceasefire and other commitments. The French-mediated deal obliges both sides to cease hostilities and withdraw their forces to positions of the status quo ante bellum, and also to allow humanitarian assistance. Georgia commits itself to non-use of force for good while Russia can take "additional security measures before the creation of international mechanisms", defined as vaguely as one could imagine. This loop hole has led to a procrastinated Russian withdrawal. The deal also calls for the opening of international talks on the modalities of security and stability arrangements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia had suggested discussions on the status of the regions, but agreed to modify this provision after Tbilisi's objections.

On 13 August, France convened an emergency meeting of the EU's foreign ministers' council to discuss the conflict in Georgia. According to Bernard Kouchner, many EU members were willing to contribute monitors but they needed a UN resolution. Such a perspective was not appealing, since despite several sessions of the Security Council, the UN was unable to produce a resolution on the matter. Russia used its veto against Western-sponsored draft resolutions and in a tit-for-tat play pushed its own drafts which did not include a reference to Georgia's territorial integrity.

Conclusions: This large-scale conflict was precipitated primarily by Russia's policies in the region. Should internationalization be allowed, Russians feared, Georgia would easily move towards restoring its integrity and escape Russian influence by putting itself on a fast track to accession into the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization, the adversary of Russia's Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. Holding a grip on the situation in these regions also gave Russia a considerable say in Georgia's domestic power politics and economic development. Thus, many thought Russians saw it in their interest to have a "controlled instability" there, up to a certain point. But as it turned out, their goals were much more far-reaching.

It is obvious that the purpose of the Russian invasion was not to "protect" Ossetians or to save their "guys", but to eliminate Georgian military capabilities, to inflict unbearable harm and humiliation to Georgia, and to cripple its economy (e.g. blocking highways, blowing railway bridges and ruining civil infrastructure, and even burning its forests). By doing so, Moscow has hoped to instigate social discord against President Saakashvili whom they initially intended to bring down by bombing and taking over the capital. Russia was apparently planning to produce turmoil in Georgia derailing the country from its integration into NATO.

This hot war in a hot August has other wider messages for the West: they range from the Kremlin's efforts to gain control over the alternative energy routes running through Georgia to warning Ukraine and other CIS members against pro-Western inclinations, and possibly to signalling the return of the "Cold War". This brutal invasion by more than 20,000 Russian troops of a country which was doing so well with Western assistance could not have been just about South Ossetia.

The West must realize that until international peacekeepers and monitors are sent to Georgia, the situation will remain dangerous.

Nodar Tangiashvili is Advisor on International Relations at the Ministry of Defence of Georgia