

From the Editors

The Report of the International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia

On 30 September 2009, the Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia was presented to the parties to the conflict, the Council of the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the United Nations. The report can be viewed in full-text at <http://www.ceiig.ch/Report.html>. For this issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest, we present a number of different points of view on the conflict.

The Longer “Countdown to War”: Growing Confrontation between Georgia and Russia 2004–2008

By Uwe Halbach, Berlin

Abstract

The military events around South Ossetia of August 2008 constitute the factual core for the military and legal assessments of the “Five Day War.” However, the analysis of the origins of the conflict cannot focus solely on these events. The “Countdown to war” has to be seen in a longer perspective and the conflict developments have to be put in their historical context.

The Burden of the Past

The bilateral relations between Russia and Georgia build the core of the historical context. There are different answers to the question when these relations transformed into growing confrontation. The broader historical perspective goes back to 1801. Georgian historical narrative emphasizes the two annexations by Russia, in 1801 and 1921, as national traumas. Additionally, there is a burden of mutual claims and contradictions inherited from the perestroika and early post-Soviet period. The April 1989 events, when Soviet forces brutally broke up a demonstration in Tbilisi, marked a turning point after which Georgia sought independence. This event became the “chosen trauma” for the post-Soviet Georgian sense of national identity. During the Gamsakhurdia era, this identity translated into a Georgian ethnocentrism which confronted Russia but also deterred ethnic minorities and autonomous regions from supporting Georgia’s independence project. With regard to the Shevardnadze era, many authors fix the year 1999 as a starting point for a steady deterioration of bilateral relations.

But it was mainly the period after the summer of 2004 that these relations, already burdened, turned into the most precarious relationship between the Russian Federation and a neighboring post-Soviet state. Since then both sides have engaged in conflict rhetoric. It

intensified as tensions escalated around Abkhazia and South Ossetia from March 2008, alarming the international community, though in retrospect, it was too late. This conflict discourse was embedded in a process of rapid armament in the South Caucasus. Growth in military spending there largely exceeded GDP growth. Between 2004 and 2008 Georgia and Azerbaijan were among the most rapidly arming states worldwide. Military spending in Georgia increased from 0.5 percent of GDP to 8 percent in 2008. Likewise Georgia’s separatist entities became more militarized with support from Russia.

Georgian–Russian relations were already fraught with dissension before the November 2003 peaceful transition in Tbilisi, which brought a young generation to power, the first real post-Soviet generation to comprise the power elite of a CIS state. Problems poisoning these relations from the time of the late Shevardnadze era included the Georgian demand for a Russian troop withdrawal and the dismantling of military bases on Georgian territory according to commitments Russia made at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit, the Georgian participation in the construction of the BTC-oil pipeline, Russian demands for military access to Georgian territory for fighting armed Chechen rebels in uncontrolled areas like the Pankisi Gorge, and increased US mili-

tary support for the modernization of a hitherto paltry Georgian army. The major reason for Russian frustration with Georgia was the strong Euro-Atlantic orientation of Georgian foreign and security policies and the country's portrayal of these efforts as an act of "fleeing the Russian Empire". Georgia's drive for NATO membership had the greatest impact on bilateral relations among all the other factors. After the "Rose Revolution" Moscow perceived Georgia and Ukraine as proxies implementing a US policy of promoting "colored revolutions" in Russia's "near abroad".

The Connection with the Unresolved Conflicts

The crucial factor in this political confrontation was that most sources of disagreement between the two sides, such as Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation, were coupled with Georgia's unresolved conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Any improvement in Russian–Georgian relations could only be expected in areas that were not connected with these conflicts. However, such neutral areas were shrinking as President Saakashvili declared the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity his political priority and practiced a policy of accelerated reintegration, whereas Russia increased its support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia by a progressive integration of these territories into its economic and security space. In particular, Russia staffed the local government in South Ossetia with cadres from its own security and administrative apparatus and conferred Russian citizenship on the majority of residents in both regions. Georgia's objection to the dominant Russian role in the peacekeeping operation in both conflict zones in accordance with the ceasefire agreements of 1992 (South Ossetia) and 1994 (Abkhazia) was motivated by its perception that Russia's conflict management in the South Caucasus was not "peacekeeping, but keeping in pieces". Russia was seen as the protagonist responsible for ensuring that the conflicts remained "frozen", in order to maintain a "controllable instability" for the purpose of its own power projection in the region. For Georgia the central symbol of this "creeping annexation" was Russia's policy of "passportizatsia" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The South Ossetia Crisis 2004

Given the connection between Russian–Georgian bilateral relations and unresolved regional conflicts, it was not surprising that the first incident to cause a rapid deterioration in these relations during this period was the South Ossetia crisis in the summer 2004. Statements like "South Ossetia will be reintegrated into Georgia within

a year at the latest", made by President Saakashvili at a news conference in July 2004 set off alarm bells in Moscow. At the beginning of his presidency, Saakashvili had promised to restore Georgia's territorial integrity by the end of his tenure. Shortly after the peaceful reintegration of the autonomous province of Ajara, the new government began an anti-smuggling offensive in South Ossetia, where the Ergneti market had indeed become a center of illegal trade in the Caucasus. In Russia this offensive was perceived as a Georgian effort to regain control over all of South Ossetia and met with strong resistance. In August 2004 the crisis reached a peak with shelling of Tskhinvali and escalating armed clashes between Georgian and Ossetian troops. This South Ossetia crisis was accompanied by maritime incidents on the Black Sea coast, with the Georgian coast guard threatening to fire at ships attempting to dock in Abkhazia without authorization from Tbilisi. Russian commentators linked the alleged "Georgian aggression" to US military support and Georgian ambitions to join NATO. But Georgia's Western partners did not in any way condone the "reconquista-rhetoric." Thus it was possible to prevent an open war in South Ossetia involving Russian troops in August 2004. However, this crisis had two consequences: First, it spoiled relations between Tbilisi and Moscow after a short period of thaw and discussions among presidents Putin and Saakashvili about improving these relations. Second, it caused a fundamental commitment problem for Georgia with regard to further confidence-building efforts towards its breakaway territories.

The Spy Scandal 2006

The autumn 2006 spy scandal provided a vivid example of the Russian–Georgian crisis and its emotional dimension. This incident began when Georgia arrested four Russian military officers in Tbilisi, accusing them of being members of an espionage network whose goal was to block Georgia's efforts to join NATO. Both sides exacerbated this crisis through undiplomatic actions and reactions. The Georgian authorities handled it in a manner that was considered provocative in Russia and beyond. They did not expel the arrested officers discreetly – the standard *modus operandi* in such cases – but in highly theatrical circumstances. In Russia, Tbilisi's actions triggered an anti-Georgian campaign and brought Russia's coercive Georgia policy to its peak, with a broad spectrum of punitive economic and political measures. Georgia became Russia's chief nemesis abroad. In October 2006 Russia cut air, land, sea, postal, and banking communications with Georgia. Earlier in

the year it had already slapped an embargo on Georgian wine, fruit, vegetables, and mineral water, citing health concerns. The crisis affected the behavior of Russian authorities toward the Georgian diaspora living in Russia in a way that damaged Russia's image in the world. If Russian authorities before this time contributed to public xenophobia through inaction, incompetence or irresponsibility, now government figures actively incited ethnic hostility. EU ministers of foreign affairs expressed deep concern about the economic, political and humanitarian costs of the Russian measures against Georgians and Georgia. The "spy affair" alarmed the international community about the growing confrontation between Russia and Georgia. It ended with the return of the Russian Ambassador to Tbilisi in January 2007 and with the lifting of at least some of the Russian sanctions against Georgia. But it left the impression of irreversibly spoiled bilateral relations and revealed deep emotional scars in the relationship.

Confrontation Instead of Cooperation

Numerous other issues escalated the confrontation between both states: mutual military threats and violations of Georgian airspace, Russia's "Kosovo precedent formula" with regard to secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet space, which was rather selectively used against Georgia, Georgia's operation in the upper Kodori valley, and a military buildup, provocations and incidents around the two conflict zones. In this growing confrontation, both sides missed chances for cooperation. The two parties should have realized that they had shared

interests in stability in their common neighborhood. As the Russian ambassador to Georgia said upon his return to Tbilisi in January 2007 after the "spy scandal", the South and North Caucasus constitute more or less a single organism with common security challenges. A region like Pankisi, located in Georgia's border zone alongside Chechnya, symbolized such mutuality of security challenges to both states. The border between the Russian Federation and Georgia runs along critical zones of intersection between North and South Caucasian security challenges. Both sides shared economic interests. For Georgia, Russia remained the most important export market and the largest labor market for the growing Georgian diaspora. On the other side, Georgia is of importance for Russia's economic actions in the South Caucasus. More than once, Russia's punitive measures against Georgia hit the economy of Armenia, its closest ally in the region, which is largely dependent on access to Georgian territory for its exports.

With its policy of withdrawing support for Georgia's territorial integrity and recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "independent states" after the armed conflict in August 2008, Russia failed to win any outside support, not even from its closest allies in its "zone of privileged interests." On the other hand, Georgia from the beginning of its "second independence" had done a lot to alienate its breakaway regions and push them away from its own independence project. Thus, on all sides negative emotions and stereotypes prevailed over shared interests.

About the Author

Dr. Uwe Halbach is a researcher with the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, The German Institute for International and Security Affairs, in Berlin. He contributed as an expert to the work of the Independent International Fact Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. This article represents his personal opinion.