

But the current extremely hostile reaction to this process on the part of the US, European Union, G7 and OSCE seems to be quite irrational. Are these not the very same countries which only recently recognized the forced separation of Kosovo from Serbia and recognized it as an independent state against the will of the Serbian government, having thus drawn new lines in Europe? Why are the South Ossetians and Abkhazians, who are trying to escape from the Georgian bully and who already have viable statehoods for more than 15 years, denied the same right to recognition as was allowed for Kosovo Albanians? Only because they are perceived as pro-Russian, and the Albanians (and Georgians, for that matter) as pro-Western? Unfortunately, what we see in this angry reaction is the application of the policy of double standards and attempts to use these morally dubious principles against the historical choice of the nations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Principles should not be conditioned by political considerations, and the right to freedom from oppression is indivisible.

Abkhazia will remain a separate independent state, and it does not plan to become a part of any other state. It is determined to prove to the world that it can be a responsible member of the international community, which is governed by the rule of law, and which supports democracy, civic liberties and rights, free media and respect for minorities. The natural beauty of Abkhazia, its mild subtropical climate, warm Black Sea and excellent beaches will soon turn this country into a popular tourist destination for many in the West and the East alike, bringing about economic prosperity. The world must give the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia a chance to lead the peaceful and dignified life they deserve!

Questions and Answers

Interview with Archil Gegeshidze, Senior Fellow at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) in Tbilisi

Russian Analytical Digest: Why has the situation around the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia turned from bad to worse in recent months?

Archil Gegeshidze: The “colored revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, respectively, and the NATO and EU expansions to the east in 2004, by which the West moved to Russia’s borders when it included the Baltic States, signaled to the Kremlin that the existing *status quo* in which Russia had retained influence on the post-Soviet domain was no longer sustainable. Indeed, Georgia began to make strides toward NATO integration and, at the same time, attempted to “unfreeze” the long dormant conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by changing the Russia-dominated negotiation and peacekeeping formats. An agitated Russia resorted to regime change tactics by financing proxy political forces in Georgia and imposing an economic embargo (2006) in the hope of stimulating social insurgency. As these policies failed, the Kremlin may have decided to entrap Georgia in a major military provocation in the Russia-backed breakaway regions of Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia. Russia put this plan into operation following the West’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence and the NATO Bucharest Summit (February–April 2008). The plan included: unilaterally – in fact illegally – withdrawing from a CIS economic and arms embargo imposed in 1996 on Abkhazia; increasing troop strength and introducing paratroopers into Abkhazia; illegally moving heavy weaponry and offensive forces into Abkhazia; deploying the railroad troops to prepare rails for invasion; building an illegal military base near Tskhinvali (South Ossetia); undertaking large-scale military exercises near South Ossetia and Abkhazia; and failing to redeploy the troops.

Separatist governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in coordination with Russia, had been systematically rejecting peace initiatives either proposed by Tbilisi or brokered by impartial third parties. The last one was a German-mediated peace plan for Abkhazia. In the meantime, the separatists in both regions willingly yielded to Russia and either disengaged from political dialogue with Tbilisi (as was the case with Abkhazia) or insisted on keeping outdated negotiation formats (South Ossetia). At the same time, Russia was allowed to continue its military build-up in these breakaway regions.

The Georgian government failed to develop a proper vision to resolve the conflict. The primary deficiency of Georgia’s approach has been its inconsistency and wrong assumptions. Instead of establishing direct dialogue with the separatists, the Georgian government sought direct and indirect ways of coercion. Rather than identifying measures for step-by-

step *rapprochement*, Georgia's peace proposals were heedlessly packed with status agreements, which gave the separatists cause for refusing to discuss them. As the Russian military continued its build-up in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the separatists increasingly refused to engage in dialogue, hardliners gradually prevailed in the Georgian government. Having advocated a quick military modernization, these hardliners wrongly assumed that Georgia was ready to solve the conflicts by using force at an opportune moment or whenever provoked.

On the eve of the NATO Bucharest Summit, Germany announced that it "opposes Georgia's Membership Action Plan (MAP) application because of problems surrounding the country's two disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia." France too made public its doubt on this matter stating: "we oppose the entry of Georgia and Ukraine [into NATO] because it is not the right response to the balance of power in Europe and between Europe and Russia, and we want to have a dialogue on this subject with Russia." (Both quotes from: Civil Georgia, civil.ge, 1 April 2008). Both statements were dangerous since Russia took them as a green light to further erode the situation on the ground in order to prevent Georgia from becoming eligible for MAP at the planned NATO Ministerial this December. In the wake of the Summit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that Moscow would spare no efforts to prevent membership in the alliance. General Yuri Baluevskii, the chief of staff of the Russian armed forces, echoed him, saying that Russia would protect its interests through military and "other measures" if Georgia and Ukraine joined NATO (Baluevskii quoted in: Civil Georgia, 11 April 2008).

RAD: Why has Georgia decided to intervene militarily in South Ossetia? Do you think Georgia was right to intervene in South Ossetia?

Gegeshidze: The Georgian government argues that its forces advanced into the Tskhinvali region only after days of intensive shelling that caused civilian deaths in villages under Georgian control —and after confirmation that a massive Russian land force had begun invading Georgia (for more information, see the "Timeline of Russian Aggression in Georgia" link in "Recommended Reading" below). Russia disagrees and claims that its forces entered Georgian territory only after a purported "surprise Georgian assault" on Tskhinvali. However, Moscow continues to refuse to make public the time at which Russia launched its invasion into Georgia. Nonetheless, by most accounts, Russia's invasion was a premeditated act. Obviously, unless an impartial analysis of the chronology of events before and after the escalation of hostilities is made, it would be difficult to judge fairly. Notably, the Georgian government on 29 August 2008 called for an independent panel to carry out such an investigation.

RAD: Do you think that Russia was right to react the way it did?

Gegeshidze: The extent of willingness to employ crude military force clearly indicates that Russia's action was disproportionate. The Russian attack immediately broadened from the conflict zone of South Ossetia to include the opening of a second front in Abkhazia and systematic attacks on military and economic infrastructure across Georgia's territory. Also, reputable international organizations have established as fact that the Russian military used internationally-banned cluster munitions and SS-26 missiles against civilian populations multiple times. Additionally, it goes beyond the logic of a military campaign to intentionally set forest fires by means of purposeful bombardment unless you harbor a deep grudge and anger against the country and its people. As of this moment, almost 1,000 hectares of precious, old-growth woodlands have been burnt down.

RAD: Was the Russian decision to move into South Ossetia justified?

Gegeshidze: The main premise of the Russian argument to move into Georgia – that Russia acted fully within its rights in defending its citizens in South Ossetia – is completely wrong. Russia, the argument goes, had to resort to the use of force to fulfill its constitutional responsibility to protect its citizens who faced the threat of genocide. In an attempt to claim international legitimacy and the moral high ground, Russian leaders described the military operation against Georgia interchangeably as either a "peace enforcement operation" or "a humanitarian intervention."

Let me quote from an article by Natalie Wild ("Does a State Have the Right to Protect Its Citizens Abroad?") which appeared in Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty on 22 August 2008: "For such intervention to be legitimate, however, certain conditions need to be met. These include the existence of undisputed evidence of crimes committed against the civilian population; international authorization for the use of multilateral force; the objective must be limited to preventing human suffering and protecting the population; and the use of force should not exceed that required to achieve the humanitarian objective. Even at the risk of delaying an adequate response to a humanitarian catastrophe,

these conditions need to be met in order to avoid the possible abuse of the precedent with damaging consequences for both the principle of intervention and its practical application.”

Interestingly, while Russia claimed to intervene on the basis of humanitarian concerns, its forces subsequently permitted or endorsed the systematic ethnic cleansing of Georgians from South Ossetia. UN Satellite images provide graphic evidence of this (*see Recommended Reading for a link*).

RAD: How have the Georgians reacted to Georgia’s intervention in South Ossetia? Did they support Saakashvili’s decision?

Gegeshidze: From the beginning, Georgians were perplexed. Although generally expected, the war came as a surprise. The pre-conflict propaganda war makes it difficult to understand what was actually happening. In the course of events, however, as Russia’s intervention resulted in casualties, territorial losses and ruined infrastructure, public opinion became ambivalent. On one hand, there is a sense that Georgia was entrapped in an unnecessary provocation and therefore the people need to rally round Saakashvili and support his leadership in resisting Russia’s aggression. On the other hand, many question whether this provocation could have been avoided and whether moving troops into Tskhinvali was the only option. Meantime, by common consent, these questions will not be asked until Russia withdraws from the occupied chunks of Georgian territory.

RAD: Do you think that the reaction from Washington (Russia is trying to reestablish its empire, Russia is sending a message to its neighbors not to join NATO) is justified? Does Russia have a "hidden agenda" and was it, in your view, not only about South Ossetia, but about larger geopolitical goals?

Gegeshidze: As soon as Russia extended its area of activities far beyond the zone of conflict and attacked both military and civilian targets in Georgia proper, the Kremlin’s larger imperial designs were laid bare. As Brzezinski put it in an article in *The Huffington Post* on 30 August 2008, Russia intends “to reintegrate the former Soviet space under the Kremlin’s control and to cut Western access to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia by gaining control over the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline that runs through Georgia.” Russia’s invasion also was not a response to the situation in South Ossetia, but a move to punish Georgia for its pro-Western foreign policy, as also argued by other Western scholars (*see Recommended Reading*). An intended by-product of this punishment was meant to be intimidation of governments in the post-Soviet neighborhood that are potentially disloyal to the Kremlin. Additionally, Russian aggression challenges the entire European security architecture as it has developed since the 1990s. The Kremlin masters may have been thinking that the time has come to take revenge upon the West for all the “humiliation” Russia has suffered since then: three rounds of NATO expansion, the war in Iraq, developments in Kosovo in 1999 and 2008, etc. should not remain unpunished. Vladimir Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference served as a bellwether.

RAD: Do you think it will be possible for Georgia to have normal relations with Russia again in the future?

Gegeshidze: Not in the foreseeable future. However, Europe’s history demonstrates that nations once at war can live in peace. France and Germany as well as Russia and Finland are cases in point. In Georgia’s case, despite the public’s great indignation at Russia’s aggression, there are no russophobic sentiments. As time passes and Russia changes, the two countries will coexist in peace, if not in friendship.

RAD: Do you think it is still realistic to think that Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be reintegrated into a Georgian state? If not, what would be your solution?

Gegeshidze: Obviously, in the foreseeable future, reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into a Georgian state is improbable. On one hand, the recent war and, on the other, Russia’s unilateral recognition of the breakaway regions have postponed this prospect for a long time. Hardliners were taught a bitter lesson: these conflicts do not have a military solution. Only voluntary reconciliation may bring, if ever, Georgians and the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia together. Unfortunately, however, recent developments have moved this objective beyond reach. The situation is further complicated by the ever escalating confrontation between Russia and the West. Georgia and the breakaway regions may find themselves on opposing sides of new dividing lines. Nonetheless, modern history provides examples that show that despite long decades of alienation, peoples may renegotiate arrangements of coexistence in a common state. Cyprus is a case in point. If and when Georgia becomes a truly democratic state, disenchanted Abkhazia and

South Ossetia, unless already annexed by Russia, may want to review their strategic course of development and join Georgia in its Europeanization aspirations to march together toward joint EU-modeled solutions.

RAD: What should Europe and the US do?

Gegeshidze: I would recommend them to do several things:

- Reach a higher degree of coordination in their policy vis-à-vis the crisis in Georgia and with regard to Russia.
- Compel Russia to immediately withdraw from what Moscow refers to as “buffer zones.”
- Compel Russia to adhere to other points of the Sarkozy-Medvedev-Saakashvili “cease-fire agreement.”
- De-legitimize Russia’s “passportization” strategy; deprive Moscow of the right of “humanitarian intervention.”
- Make Russia pay a high political/economic cost for its aggressive acts against Georgia through tangible actions.
- Extend MAP to Georgia so that Moscow understands its mistaken calculations.
- Offer Georgia tangible incentives within the EU Neighborhood Policy.
- Provide Georgia with alternative security guarantees until it accedes to NATO.
- Design a substantial reconstruction aid package for Georgia.

RAD: What would you recommend Russian politicians to do?

Gegeshidze: “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail” (Abraham Maslow).

RAD: What would you recommend Georgian politicians do?

Gegeshidze:

- Raise the efficiency of humanitarian assistance to displaced persons and ensure provision of shelter before winter.
- Ensure the sustainability of the economy and the stability of the financial system.
- Press for an internationalization of the conflicts and the deployment of multinational police forces.
- Improve the country’s democratic credentials to sustain mobilization of Western support.

Recommended Reading

- UN Satellite data from South Ossetia – <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/08/28/georgi19712.htm>
- Georgian Government, “Timeline of Russian Aggression in Georgia,” 25 August 2008, Tbilisi, http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6625&Itemid=65.
- Svante E. Cornell, Johanna Popjanevski, and Niklas Nilsson, “Russia’s War in Georgia: Causes and Implications for Georgia and the World,” CACI, Silk Road Studies Program, Policy Paper, August 2008, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/0808Georgia-PP.pdf>.