

Editorial

Message from the Editors

Dear Readers,

This issue of the Russian Analytical Digest presents articles about the August fighting in the Caucasus from a variety of different perspectives. Each article represents the views of its author, but not necessarily the views of the RAD editors. We have tried to be as comprehensive as possible in our selection of texts.

RAD Editors

Analysis

Caucasus Conflict Breaks Old Rules of the Game

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Abstract

In August 2008, the years-long Georgian-Ossetian conflict reached a new climax in the “five-day war.” This outbreak of fighting was the third armed conflict between Georgia and the unrecognized republic of South Ossetia (*de jure* a part of the Georgian state) during the last 17 years. The sides fought for the first time in 1991–2 and again in August 2004. However, the military battle of August 2008 qualitatively different from the two previous ones because the Russian military participated directly in it. In contrast to the actions of separate Russian soldiers and units during the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–3, the Kremlin not only supported what was happening on the ground, but named the exercise “Forcing Georgia to Peace,” in an effort to save the Ossetian people from a large-scale humanitarian catastrophe. In contrast to the previous Georgian-Ossetian battles, this time in the conflict between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali (and also between Moscow and Tbilisi), the West was actively involved. The states of the Commonwealth of Independent States also were more active than they had been in the 1990s. This activity focused in particular around Ukraine and the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which is based in Crimea and participated in the conflict. For the first time in 17 years, Tbilisi fought with separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on two fronts. In August 2008, the events in and around South Ossetia were the main questions on the international agenda. Most prominently, during the first days of the conflict, the UN Security Council met to discuss the situation in the Caucasus three times.

Several Stages of Conflict

The Georgian-Ossetian conflict evolved through several stages from a local conflict in a remote and poorly known part of the world into an event of international significance. The first stage (1988–89) was ideological. In this period the battling sides defined their main claims against each other and formed the underlying ethno-political mythologies of the future conflict. The second stage (1989–91) focused on politics and the law. Over the course of two years, the Georgian and Ossetian antagonists conducted a legislative (*status*) war.

The third stage (January 1991–June 1992) was armed conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia. In the course of the military activities, Georgian units stormed Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, three

times (February 1991, March 1991, and June 1992). North Ossetia, a region in the Russian Federation’s North Caucasus, was drawn into the conflict since it received approximately 43,000 refugees from South Ossetia and other parts of Georgia. Russia had no choice but to participate since the conflict flowed onto its territory. In the beginning of the 1990s refugees from South Ossetia and Georgia proper made up 16 percent of the population of North Ossetia. Upon arriving in North Ossetia, these refugees were drawn into a different conflict, the one between the Ossetians and the Ingush. The first violence in this conflict occurred over the disputed Prigorodnyi Raion in 1992 and the dispute remains unresolved to this day. No other foreign policy problem has such a direct impact on Russia’s internal security.

Freezing the Conflict

On June 24, 1992 Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze signed the Dagomyss (Sochi) agreement on the principles for regulating the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Shortly thereafter, on July 14, peacekeeping operations began in South Ossetia, with the introduction of Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian peace-keeping battalions. Military operations ended and a Joint Control Commission (Russia-Georgia, South Ossetia-North Ossetia) was created to monitor the ceasefire.

In this way in 1992 the armed conflict was “frozen” and the fourth stage of the conflict began. It lasted until May 2004. In contrast to the situation in Abkhazia, there were never large-scale ethnic cleansings of the Georgian population in South Ossetia. Until August 2008, Georgians and Ossetians lived side by side. Even the constitution of the unrecognized South Ossetia republic recognized Georgian as a minority state language. Shootings, blockades, and provocations came to an end. During the “frozen” stage of the conflict, the sides managed to keep relative peace. There was direct bus service between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali until 2004 and markets (such as Ergneti) functioned where Georgian and Ossetians traded together. Tbilisi and Tskhinvali mutually recognized automobile registrations. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that the basis of the economy in the separatist region was contraband trade conducted by members of both ethnic groups. However, this black market strengthened ties between South Ossetia and Georgia. In an informal way, it established mutual trust between the two conflicting societies. Moreover, during 12 years they developed significant positive potential in the conflict resolution process. First, Georgian and Russian battalions carried out the peace-keeping mission. Second, the parties signed important documents providing for the rehabilitation of conflict zones. Among these, especially important were the Memorandum on measures for providing security and strengthening mutual trust between the sides in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict of May 16, 1996, and the Russian-Georgian inter-governmental Agreement on cooperation in restoring the economy in the zone of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and on the return of refugees from December 3, 2000.

Unfreezing the Conflict

The fifth stage can be characterized as the “unfreezing” of the conflict. It began with an attempt by official Tbilisi to revise the existing balance of power in South Ossetia and the political-legal format for the peace-keeping operations there. On July 20, 2004, the president of Georgia publicly announced that he did

not exclude the possibility of renouncing the Dagomyss agreement. “If it is impossible to raise a Georgian flag in Tskhinvali Raion within the framework of the treaty, I am ready to exit from this agreement,” he declared. With this statement, Saakashvili demonstrated a desire to achieve three goals:

- Internationalizing the Georgian-Ossetian conflict by involving the US and European countries in its resolution;
- Reformatting the conflict from Georgian-Ossetian to Georgian-Russian and presenting it as an example of Russian neo-imperialism;
- Rejecting the exclusive role for Russia as a guarantor of peace in the region.

The realization of these three goals became the essence of the fifth stage of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, which ran from 2004 to 2008. The second war took place August 8–19, 2004, in South Ossetia. This armed standoff involved the use of infantry and artillery. Although the two sides managed to separate themselves by the end of August, that month began a new wave of shootings, attacks, provocations, and blockades along important routes of communication.

Old Rules of the Game No Longer Work

By August 7, 2008, the status quo in Southern Ossetia and to a lesser degree Abkhazia was broken. The new stage of conflict in South Ossetia changed the political-legal and military configuration not only in the two “hot spots” of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but exerted a serious influence on the entire ethno-political situation in Europe.

From this date, the old rules of the game that took shape after the collapse of the Soviet Union no longer work in the Caucasus, and possibly in the Black Sea region and even in the CIS as a whole. In August 2008 Eurasia witnessed a decisive overload of conflicts. An extremely important new precedent has been set in which the legal and political agreements, guaranteeing the status quo and the freezing of conflicts, no longer works. Neither Georgia, nor Russia now observes them. Georgia refuses to follow the Dagomyss and Moscow agreements regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia’s leadership now widely interprets the understanding of peacekeeping operations. Russia has clearly exceeded the limit for 3,000 peacekeepers. One cannot help but notice the use of special purpose units in the conflict zones, since they are clearly not involved in peace-keeping. Additionally, the Russian troops went beyond the geographical limits of the security zone defined in the 1992 and 1994 agreements by sending troops to such Georgian cities as Gori, Poti, and Senaki. Of course, several of Russia’s actions are reactions to the unfreezing of the conflict started by Georgia. But

they objectively work against the earlier rules of the game. In 2008, the conflicts within the CIS went to a qualitatively new level. If these rules were defined in the beginning of the 1990s directly by the process of the collapse of the Soviet Union, today they are determined not by the inertia of the past, but by the current dynamics of development and the construction of new nation-states.

There are no more frozen conflicts. This reality from the 1990s disappeared with the “Yeltsin generation.” Now conflicts are planned and resolved by a post-Soviet generation of politicians. However, this generation is developing new rules of the game as it goes. What the new configuration will be we’ll see in the near future. In 2008, not only the states of the South Caucasus, but also Ukraine, announced its intention to move beyond previous agreements. Kiev’s plan to block the ships of the Black Sea Fleet from returning to the base in the Crimea is an assault on the entire complex of Russian-Ukrainian agreements.

Redefining Borders

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first redrawing of borders took place. These lines were not always accepted as legitimate. The breakup of the Soviet Union according to the borders of its 15 republics (which seemed logical from the outside) provoked mixed reactions among the former autonomous formations, who were not entirely pleased that the former union republics became independent countries. The result was ethnic conflicts, which created winners and losers. Some states were not interested in preserving the results of the first effort at line-drawing. Accordingly, they had an interest in revising the boundaries with the aid of various external forces. The losers did not accept the situation that appeared after the conflicts were frozen and they made it a priority to change them by any means possible.

For South Ossetia, the five-day war had tragic consequences. Today, the politicians and experts cannot name the exact number of people killed. In fact, such numbers amount to political arithmetic for the various interested parties. The infrastructure of South Ossetia is effectively destroyed and without the Russian intervention, the region would have suffered the same fate as the Republic of Serbian Krajina, a Serb separatist region of Croatia that was ultimately reintegrated back into Croatia in an effort to preserve its territorial integrity. Many of the buildings have been destroyed and numerous refugees have fled their homes.

For the Georgians, the five days of August were also a terrible catastrophe. They effectively spelled the end of the “united Georgia” project. After the third war in 17 years, it will hardly be possible to reintegrate the

citizens of South Ossetia into Georgia. Additionally, Georgia received a new wave of refugees from South Ossetia. At the same time, we must point out that between 2004 and 2008 the ethnic Georgian villages on the so-called Liakhv corridor (Tamarasheni, Kekhvi, Achabeti, and Kurta) were well equipped as cement fortresses, well armed, and supplied with high-tech equipment from Tbilisi. These villages blockaded Tskhinvali, cut off its supplies, and closed the Transcaucasus highway. In 2008, the Georgian population of these villages ended up paying for the adventures of the Tbilisi politicians. As former parliamentarian Ivlian Haindrava correctly pointed out, “the teenage complexes of the commander-in-chief brought this unhappiness to the lives and health of thousands of people.”

By formal criteria, Russia was the winner. Its actions were justified, taking into account the many connections between the security of the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus. Russia succeeded in blocking the total destruction of the military-political infrastructure of South Ossetia. Russia temporarily took control of the city of Gori, which over the last two years was a staging ground for the Georgian attack. The city housed a military hospital, morgue, and other elements of the military rear. Georgian subunits were pushed out of the upper parts of the Kodori Gorge, where they had arrived two years ago in violation of the Moscow agreement of 1994. However, through its actions, Russia also helped destroy the status quo and unfroze the conflict. The benefits from the confrontation with the West are not yet visible, while the costs are all too clear. In conditions of a complete collapse of security in the Caucasus, attempts for international intervention will only increase. The success of the military campaign could also give Moscow the illusion that complicated problems can be solved at one stroke without long negotiations and complex procedures (was it really too difficult to convene the Federation Council to give the actions of the Russian soldiers and officers legal form?).

The Role of the Russian Military Abroad

For the first time in many years, Russia took military action beyond its borders. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian military and border guards participated in two civil wars in Tajikistan (1992–1997) and Georgia (1993). However, after these events, the Russian army participated in military activities only on its own territory.

In 2008 the format of the Russian army’s participation abroad differed greatly from its historical experience in both the imperial and Soviet periods. The Russian forces did not seek to resolve ideological issues as they had in putting down the Hungarian rebellion of 1849 or during the events in Budapest in 1956 or in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The goal also was not terri-

torial expansion, although Tbilisi is accusing Moscow of this. The main goal of the exercise was to protect the security of the North Caucasus. If Russia had remained quiet in the case of South Ossetia, in the North Caucasus, there would have been forces who would have been ready to replay the battle for Prigorodnyi Raion. It is another question why Russia either cannot or will not articulate this national interest, fearing that the country will be seen as weak or vulnerable. Whatever the case, Russia emphasized its role in the “near abroad,” analogous to the role of the US in Latin America, Israel in the Middle East, Australia in Oceania, and France in its former African colonies. Russia has laid out a qualitatively new designation for its zone of vital and legitimate interests.

International Consequences

The project to build up a Commonwealth of Independent States has now finally collapsed. This is one of the key results of the “five-day war.” The crux of the matter is not simply Georgia’s exit from the group and Ukraine’s willingness to leave. The real issue is the way that the members view this institution. Even Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Belarus, which have a reputation as the main Eurasian partners of Russia, abstained from one-sided evaluations of the war. Most members of the CIS have their own separatist “skeletons in the closet” and therefore are afraid of Russia gaining too much power since it presents a threat to their own unity. Therefore, the CIS is no longer an appropriate instrument for developing common approaches and methodologies for solving conflicts. The five-day war only strengthened this tendency.

Likewise, the alter-CIS institution, GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) also did not prove very effective or unified in its positions. In the person of its president, Ukraine took a pro-Georgia position, although there were many different opinions inside the country. The announcement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan on August 8 in support of Georgia’s territorial unity consisted of general phrases (“on the compliance of the Georgian operation with ‘international law’”) and did not receive any further development. Baku preferred to be careful since it is interested in stable relations with Russia. In contrast to Georgia, Azerbaijan has not built its foreign policy on the basis of sharp confrontation. Baku sees Russia as a counterweight to the West, with which Azerbaijan’s relations are not as close as Georgia’s. Moldova’s position was

also cautious since it wants to reintegrate with the unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) and is willing to accept important Russian conditions, such as not joining NATO, neutrality, and the recognition of Russian property on its territory. Accordingly, within GUAM there were various positions toward the Russian actions and varying degrees of willingness to enter into conflict with Moscow.

The main theme raised by the “five-day war” is the self-determination of unrecognized republics. In “freezing” the conflicts at the beginning of the 1990s, Russia gave its agreement to the existence of such unrecognized republics as the main result of the conflicts. The frozen status meant that the resolution of the conflict would be put off to a better time, with a more profitable political situation and the achievement of compromise among the various sides. In such conditions, predetermining the status of the disputed territories would not be rational. Thus, the unresolved status of the de facto states defined the political reality of the 1990s. This reality included preserving the status quo and the absence of significant military activity (in Abkhazia, there were attempts to change the republic’s status in 1998 and 2001, but they were nowhere near the scale of Tskhinvali 2008). The relative peace gave hope that in some form the sides would be able to agree. Now, the self-determination of unrecognized states will be one more instrument of influence for Russia, a situation that cannot help but arouse tensions among its neighbors.

Finally (in order of discussion rather than importance), is the role of the West. There is no united position among the US, countries of old Europe, and new members of the European Union. Only the representatives of the US pursued a consistently pro-Georgian policy. The others were more reserved. Even within the confines of old and new Europe, there were different opinions. Nevertheless, overall, the West demonstrated the limited nature of its resources for influencing the situation. There were many emotions, ideologies and even more stereotypes from the past, but there was insufficient pragmatism.

In August 2008 we face a new South Caucasus with a qualitatively new agenda. After the Tskhinvali blitzkrieg, Georgia has almost no chance to restore its territorial unity. Return to the status quo is also impossible since Russia on August 26, 2008 has formally recognized the independent status of the two territories. However, the work on determining exactly what this status means is only beginning.

About the author

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