

Analysis

Eyes Wide Open

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Abstract

The latest events in Georgia highlighted new realities emerging in the South Caucasus as well as in Europe as a whole. Direct, large-scale Russian aggression against its neighboring state followed by the unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia prove that, besides abusing its energy power, Russia will not hesitate to resort to military force while defending and advancing its interests. At the same time, the inadequacy of Georgia's leadership is a clear indication of serious problems inside the country requiring immediate and fundamental political reforms. Those reforms should prevent irresponsible decision-making by establishing a system of checks and balances and rule of law, while providing institutional guarantees for pluralism, democracy, and the development of a free society.

Another Excuse for Saakashvili?

The Russian-Georgian war triggered a variety of controversial, sometimes opposing, assessments and generalizations. With a few exceptions, one can categorize them into two main views:

1. The Georgian government made an adventurous attempt to resolve the conflict in South Ossetia by using force, but was stopped by the Russian response, which at one blow undid the Gordian knot of endless conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
2. The Russian Federation launched deliberate aggression against sovereign and democratic Georgia, seeking to replace Georgia's pro-western president, reorient the country's foreign policy, and complete the decade-and-a-half-long process of creeping annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Such oversimplified visions arouse both bewilderment and disappointment simultaneously. Bewilderment results from the fact that even though the situation is extremely complicated and dangerous, it is not so intricate that experienced politicians and analysts should be confused and/or disoriented. Disappointment comes from the politically-motivated misuse of casualty counts to rescue one's political power or even political existence and impudently demonstrate another's imperial ambitions.

It is no secret that a great-power spirit is dominating the Kremlin again, one that traditionally manifests itself in brute force. Regardless of what the Putin/Medvedev team do, however, we should not consider Saakashvili automatically to be a democrat and liberal. At the same time, infantile and irresponsible leadership in Tbilisi should not be justification for Russian aggression either. One should keep in mind that the threats coming from the two regimes, which confront each other while adopting similar methods of ruling at home and interacting on the other, are of incomparably different

scale. Though the "enfant terrible" Saakashvili has produced a series of headaches for Europe, he mainly generates problems and troubles for his own people. The neo-imperialistic undertakings of Putin/Medvedev, in contrast, have reached a continental scale. Correspondingly, the problem of Russia under this tandem has become a global issue and only the consolidated international efforts of all democratic forces, working on the basis of a well-designed, long-term strategy, may succeed in dealing with it. As for Georgia – at least some of the problems Saakashvili generated may be resolved sooner and in a relatively easy manner.

The necessary (but not sufficient) precondition for achieving real positive change in Georgia is modifying the Western way of communicating and cooperating with the country. The West's extensive identification of Saakashvili with Georgia exceeds even the comparable case under Shevardnadze. The West excused Saakashvili's first adventure in South Ossetia in 2004 as the result of youth and inexperience; it pardoned the opposition crackdown of November 2007 by declaring Saakashvili wrong but having learned his lesson; and it overlooked the rigged elections of 2008, declaring "Who else but Saakashvili?" Such permissiveness finally led him to August 2008. The tactics of "eyes wide shut" prevailing in Washington D.C. towards Saakashvili's authoritarian manners have not been revised since President Bush called Georgia a "beacon of democracy" while visiting Tbilisi in May 2005. Tbilisi more than once either did not hear or misinterpreted the sophisticated diplomatic language of European "soft power."

Georgian Government Performed Poorly

The Georgian government failed to score high marks for the August 2008 events in political, military, humanitarian, and economic areas.

Many now question the predictability of Georgian policies. The prospects for reintegrating Abkhazia and South Ossetia were vague before the conflict; now the situation is almost hopeless. Chances for NATO integration have hardly been bolstered. The fragile stability in the region has been undermined, while the Russian military presence increased dramatically. Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, following the West's controversial recognition of Kosovo, feeds separatist's aspirations not only in the South Caucasus, but also far beyond. The dangerously increased tension in Western-Russian relations calls into question the international community's ability to find sustainable solutions for Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran, and further undermines the efficiency of such international organizations as the UN, OSCE or Council of Europe.

Georgia's militarization – including enormous military spending (about 25 percent of the state budget and up to 8 percent of GDP), extensive yearly increases in the number of servicemen, and expensive programs for training reservists – proved to be inexpedient. A country with the resources available to Georgia simply cannot afford to have 37,000 troops that meet NATO requirements; a figure of 15,000 may be more realistic. By comparison, the military forces of all three Baltic States taken together are just less than 8,000. At the same time, Russia has now ruined the military infrastructure in Georgia, destroying some equipment and taking other material to Russia.

Humanitarian losses are the most painful since it will be impossible to erase what has happened. Hundreds of lives were lost, thousands were traumatized physically and/or mentally, tens of thousands joined the list of refugees and IDPs, while dwellings and entire villages were wiped out. Georgian Defense Minister Davit Kezerashvili admitted that Georgian forces used the "GRAD" BM-21 multiple rocket system to target administrative buildings in Tskhinvali. When used in an urban environment, GRAD rockets inevitably cause collateral damage; which translates to simply killing peaceful residents of the town. After the Georgian retreat, Ossetian fighters and Cossaks, who followed the advancing Russian troops, devastated Georgian villages; Russian aviation bombarded a number of towns and villages beyond the zone of military actions, reportedly using unconventional weapons.

There are consequences for the Georgian economy that are still to be carefully calculated. Damaged communications and infrastructure, such as the Poti sea port facilities, may be promptly restored thanks to anticipated Western support. But what about private business investments in a vulnerable country with an unpredictable government? After all, the vitally important East-West transportation artery (roads, railways, and oil

and natural gas pipelines) passes within easy range of the Russian military units deployed in South Ossetia. About 20,000 ethnic Georgians expelled from South Ossetia and the Kodori gorge in upper Abkhazia must be supported over an uncertain period of time.

Given these high costs can Georgia expect any benefits?

The psychological and moral consequences of the conflict leave no room for optimism. The martial law introduced in Georgia for 15 days has been extended for another 15 days. The official propaganda on government-controlled TV channels totally disorients the population and is actually directed towards achieving one central goal: justifying Saakashvili and even presenting him as the savior of the nation (some in the US, such as Richard Holbrooke, stick to the same agenda). No reliable data about casualties; no data about the costs either of the military operation or the economic damages are given; no time on governmental TV-channels is available for alternative opinions. The state-controlled media seek to create the illusion that everything that happened was the only way towards restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. The president promises to rebuild an army that will be ten times stronger than it was. Georgians continue to live in the medley of lies and bragging.

Some claim that the Russians prepared a trap for Saakashvili. Russia's North Caucasus military grouping and the Black Sea Fleet were in operational readiness well before the hostilities started. If your neighbor brings a huge cannon, loads it, and aims at your house, one can, if he wishes, take this as "a trap." But it seems too risky to start throwing stones at this cannon. The best known way not to be entrapped is to avoid the trap. Saakashvili's government not only failed to do so, but took a disastrous step directly into the trap, despite consistent warnings from Western partners and allies. One may speculate about whether Russia would have invaded Georgia anyway. But one can hardly agree that the main function of the Georgian government is to unveil to the rest of the world how dangerous Russia has become and what threats it poses. More powerful and better protected parties, whose resources far exceed those of Georgia, should carry such a burden.

Georgians Should Share Responsibility

Georgians became the victims of both external and internal circumstances. They hardly can be blamed for the former, but they really are responsible for the latter. A lack of common sense can be observed in Georgia. The weakness of the political institutions that leaves so much space for arbitrariness in decision-making may not last for long. That is why it is the people of Georgia in the first place who must draw adequate conclusions,

part with their illusions and face the existing realities with eyes wide open.

However, it seems that Georgia is not the only place on the earth experiencing a deficit of common sense. The August 2008 events demonstrated, inter alia, the dangerous explosiveness of unresolved conflicts that were carelessly maintained in a “frozen” state for decades;

and the easiness of transforming them into hotspots. These events clearly demonstrated how fragile the stability on the EU-Russia frontier is; and that the “periphery” of Europe happened to be very close and important to the “core” of the EU. That is why everybody’s eyes in politics should be wide open all the time.

About the author

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Questions and Answers

Interview with Dr. Viacheslav Chirikba, Adviser on Foreign Policy to the President of Abkhazia

Russian Analytical Digest: Why has the situation turned from bad to worse in recent months? Why has Georgia decided to intervene militarily in South Ossetia? Why in South Ossetia and not also in Abkhazia?

Viacheslav Chirikba: One has, of course, to ask the Georgian leadership why they decided to start an all-out military assault on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinval in early August, thus violating all previously signed agreements and destroying, together with the peaceful city, the 16-year-old conflict resolution efforts. We don’t know much about the decision-making process in the Georgian leadership, and what role the numerous advisers to this leadership – American, Israeli, others – played in taking decisions on matters of crucial military and political importance.

But the Georgian motives are quite obvious. Georgia desperately needed to show the West, before the NATO ministerial meeting in December this year, that it was capable of restoring effective control over its break-away republics. South Ossetia, in comparison to Abkhazia, was seen as a relatively easy target, given that it had a much smaller army, that there were many Georgian enclaves deep inside South Ossetian territory and that it had very limited ground access to Russian territory – only through the Roki tunnel. If the blitzkrieg were successful, and Saakashvili thought it had all chances to be, then one of two great remaining obstacles on the way to its desired NATO membership – South Ossetia and Abkhazia – would have been removed.

After the attack failed, Saakashvili blamed the Americans for their false assurances that Russia wouldn’t react militarily to the assault on South Ossetia. Indeed, these calculations proved to be wrong, quite fatally for Mr. Saakashvili and for his weak, but fiercely nationalistic, country. I personally tend to believe that the Americans eventually did give Saakashvili the green light for this military campaign, whatever their own considerations, which might not necessarily coincide in all details with those of Saakashvili. As one piece of indirect evidence for this, I can refer to the talk between Assistant Deputy Secretary of State Matthew Bryza and the American Ambassador to Georgia John Teft with Abkhazia’s Security Council Secretary Stanislav Lakoba and me, as presidential adviser on foreign policy, which took place in the Abkhazian capital Sukhum on 25 July 2008. Bryza said that the situation was very tense and that they were afraid that the “hot-headed boys” in Tbilisi would *do things*, and that if there were no immediate talks, *August would be hot*.

RAD: Do you think Russia was right to intervene in South Ossetia? Do you think Russia was right to move into Abkhazia as well and into Georgia proper?

Chirikba: It is inconceivable to imagine that Russia would sit idly observing as its major political ally in the South Caucasus was being attacked by Tbilisi. The majority of the population of South Ossetia, as was probably known to Mr. Saakashvili, is Russian citizens and Russia was obliged by its constitution to protect them with all available means. It is remarkable that in the wake of the Georgian invasion, Russia first tried to secure a UN Security Council resolu-