

ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA – RUSSIA’S INTERVENTION IN GEORGIA (AUGUST 2008)

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Georgia’s government risked war with Russia. By this, Mikheil Saakashvili intended to make the global public, particularly the European Union (EU) and NATO, aware of the unresolved secession conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. His manoeuvre would have been successful if Georgia had brought about a withdrawal of Russia’s troops from the conflict zones. Conversely, Russia was very well prepared for the challenge of a military conflict with Georgia. More than that: Russia patiently waited for an attack because it believed that waging war against Georgia might solve many of the security problems in the South Caucasus. Russia’s most important challenge of averting Georgia’s planned accession to NATO would have been accomplished for the time being if it had come to war.

The Russian Federation had always sharply criticized the Kosovo policy of the USA, the European Union, and NATO because Moscow feared that the recognition of the Kosovo under international law might create a precedent that would lead to other uncontrollable attempts at separation in Russia. After all, Russia spoke from experience: It had quelled Chechen separatist insurgencies in two bloody wars (1994 to 1996 and 1999 to 2002). However, when the Kremlin was no longer able to stop the independence process in the Kosovo, Russia’s government began to think about how it could use the Kosovo case to serve its own security-policy interests. Especially the South Caucasus with its unresolved – ‘frozen’ – conflicts in Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia offered diverse options for action. As early as February 14, 2008, Russia and Abkhazia agreed on how to react in case the Kosovo declared its independence. At the same time, Moscow actually did take some hurried political and administrative steps which indicated its ‘silent annexation’ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On March 6, 2008, Russia lifted the economic, financial, and transport blockade against Abkhazia. To restore confidence and security in the conflict zone, Russia’s leadership explained its breach of contract by saying that Georgia was not pursuing a constructive policy.

On March 21, 2008, the Duma adopted a declaration ‘On the policy of the RF vis-à-vis Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria’ and proposed that President Putin and the government should search for a sovereignty option for Abkhazia and South Ossetia which might ultimately result in the recognition of their independence. The Duma emphasized that Russia should take this step immediately if Georgia continued to push ahead with its accession to NATO, or if it launched a military attack against the two republics that had not yet been recognized under international law. This declaration clearly

shows that recognizing the two provinces had been on the Kremlin's political agenda since the end of March 2008. It might well be that the 'recommendation' to issue this Duma declaration came directly from the Kremlin, for Boris Gryzlov, the president of the Duma, belongs to the circle of political decision-makers that are closest to Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev. Moreover, Putin's party, United Russia, holds the absolute majority in the Duma, and it is very unlikely that such an explosive declaration would have been issued without consulting the president personally. Thus, Russia gave the political leaders in Tbilisi to understand that it would respond by recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia under international law in either of the two cases – war or accession to NATO. Although it was not mentioned explicitly, it should have been clear to all parties involved that this meant that military bases would be established in the independent territories.

After the NATO summit in Bucharest, which basically confirmed that it was possible for Georgia to become a member of the military alliance, Russia responded with an important decision which must be seen as the first step towards recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia under international law. Russia's foreign secretary, Sergei Lavrov, was the first to say that Russia would 'do everything' to avert Georgia's accession to NATO. Yuri Baluyevski, the chief of staff, affirmed that his country would respond by 'military as well as other means' if Georgia should accede NATO. On April 14, 2008, the well-informed daily *Nezavisimaya gazeta* told its readers that Russia intended to conclude mutual-assistance agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to be able to organize its military presence independently of international obligations (UNOMIG and OSCE). On April 16, 2008, President Putin decreed that Russia must step up the support of its citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Georgia's political leaders, especially President Saakashvili, deliberately sought a military conflict with Russia and foundered on the – unexpectedly – resolute stance of the political leadership in Moscow. In 2007, Mikheil Saakashvili was deeply convinced that Russia would not attack Georgia: 'Those times are over'. Mr Saakashvili believed that the USA would react: 'Washington will not allow Russia to invade Georgia.' However, the calculation of Georgia's head of state did not work out: He had assumed that Russia's tank units in North Ossetia would not intervene in the conflict, and that its peacemaking troops deployed in South Ossetia would run away.

Now that Russia has recognized the renegade provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states on August 26, 2008, it appears very unlikely that these territories will be reintegrated into Georgia any time soon. At the same time, Russia was able to solve some key problems: The deployment of Russian troops in the region will no longer depend on Georgia but on the new 'states' with which it has been maintaining diplomatic relations since Sep-

tember 9, 2008. Since that day, Russia's military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been secure 'under international law'.

Although there are quite a few NATO generals who regard Russia's act of reprisal as 'appropriate', the key objective of Russia's intervention was not to punish Georgia or to prevent the 'genocide' of South Ossetians and Abkhazians, i.e. Georgian national minorities. This statement by Mr Medvedev clashes with the annihilation policy Russia pursued against its own minority, the Chechen people. 200,000 civilians fell victim to area bombardments during the two wars.

The fact is that Russia has been using the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as political tools to influence Georgia ever since 1992/1993. Russia's military engagement was the first evidence that Moscow had realized how serious the threat was which separatism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia posed to its own Caucasian border. Therefore, the Kremlin repeatedly made it clear that Russia would support Georgia's territorial integrity. In other words: Right from the beginning, Moscow's objective was to contain the conflicts in Georgia. Otherwise, the independence movements might have prompted the North Caucasian peoples to unite. Chechnya's two secession wars later confirmed Moscow's concerns.

When Georgia publicly expressed its desire to become a member of NATO in October 1999 under the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze, the guidelines of Russia's policy vis-à-vis Georgia changed. Moscow's key objective for the South Caucasus now was not to stir up the conflicts but to leave them in their 'frozen' state. In the medium and long term, however, it became more and more difficult to stick to this course as the USA and NATO had made Georgia the scene of an active Caucasus policy in the meantime, believing that they could operate without regard to Russia's national-security interests.

While President Eduard Shevardnadze (1995 to 2003) had banked on a peaceful solution for many years, respecting Russia's interests, his successor, Mr Saakashvili, chose a completely different strategy: Since January 2004, a military solution to the conflict was no longer ruled out, and the political class in Moscow was both alarmed and angered by Georgia's persistent endeavours to enter NATO.

After its attempt to join NATO's MAP programme in April 2008 had failed, Georgia stepped up its policy of confrontation in the conflict zones. Temuri Iakobashvili, state minister for reintegration, called the aggravation of the crisis a 'positive process': 'The situation has come to a head, ending the frozen state of the conflict. When the body temperature of a sick person rises, it does not always mean that his/her condition is worsening.' This statement indicates that Georgia's government had made a political decision: From then

on, it pursued a collision course in the trouble areas in order to 'raise the temperature' there. The objective: Russia's military units were to be replaced by international troops of the EU or the OSCE, which were to assume police functions in the renegade territories. According to Moscow's well-informed newspaper *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozrenie* (= Independent Military Review, AM), Russia's ministry of defence had ordered the 'peacemaking troops' in Abkhazia and South Ossetia 'to act as the situation demands' as early as May 2008. Moscow rated the situation in the region as critical and expected Georgia to launch a military operation. The supreme commander of the North Caucasus military district was ordered to answer any 'provocation or agreement violation on Georgia's part' directly and with 'the maximum use of arms' without prior consultation with Moscow. At the same time, the administration of Russia's president pointed out that the Kremlin would not withdraw its army from Abkhazia if Georgia cancelled Russia's mandate in Georgia. In this case, Moscow would conclude a defence pact with Abkhazia and remain in the country as an allied army.

In the meantime, Moscow offered Mr Saakashvili the conclusion of a non-aggression treaty and a cease-fire agreement. However, Georgia's president categorically turned down the offer, regarding it as Russia's attempt to establish itself permanently in the renegade provinces. With his 'act of liberation' on the night of August 7, 2008, President Saakashvili intended to drive Russia from South Ossetia once and for all.

After Russia's intervention in Georgia and the establishment of Russian military bases the confrontation between Russia and the USA in the South Caucasus grew more acrimonious. Senator Hillary Clinton got right to the heart of it in the US debate: 'Have we in any way encouraged Georgia to use military force?' William Burns, under-secretary of state, criticized Georgia's government at a senate foreign relations committee hearing, saying that Tbilisi itself gave the Russian government an excuse for its military actions when Georgian troops attacked Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. Like John Beyrle, the US ambassador in Moscow, Mr Burns confirmed that Washington had repeatedly warned the Saakashvili government against using violence in South Ossetia in the preceding days and weeks.

Moscow depicts the war in Georgia as a war of aggression staged by the USA, whose objective was to discredit Russia throughout the world. US foreign secretary Condoleezza Rice emphasized that what was needed now was transatlantic solidarity and unity vis-à-vis Russia, saying that Moscow's inappropriate actions in Georgia, which she had called 'paranoid and aggressive impulses' in the past, required determination to isolate imperial Russia and its threats. At a meeting in St. Petersburg on October 2, 2008, federal chancellor Angela Merkel again stressed that the Federal Republic of Germany re-

garded Russia's reaction in the conflict with Georgia as 'inappropriate', adding: 'We now must rebuild confidence'.

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