



## Georgia: The conflict with Russia and the crisis in South Ossetia

Standard Note: SN/IA/4819

Last updated: 18 August 2008

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On 7 August 2008 fierce fighting erupted between Georgian and Russian forces in the breakaway Georgian territory of South Ossetia. Georgia, which launched a surprise overnight offensive against separatist and Russian forces in the territory claimed that it was responding to military provocation by Moscow. Russia claimed that Georgia had sought to resolve the status of South Ossetia unilaterally, by military force. With each side accusing the other of instigating aggression, the crisis in South Ossetia quickly developed into open conflict between Georgia and Russia. Although Georgia, confronted by a swift and overwhelming Russian military response, offered an immediate ceasefire on 10 August, Russia maintained its military campaign, sending its forces way beyond the zone of conflict in South Ossetia deep into sovereign Georgian territory. As the crisis escalated, Russian forces were also deployed in Abkhazia, Georgia's other pro-Russian breakaway territory, leading to further Russian military incursions into Georgia and prompting separatist forces there to mobilise against the Georgian army. Russia ceased its offensive on 12 August, with the Kremlin claiming that it had dealt a crushing blow to Georgia's military capabilities and ambitions in South Ossetia. On 12 August Georgia and Russia reached a ceasefire agreement, negotiated by the European Union under the leadership of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the current President of the EU. Estimates of civilian casualties of the conflict remain unclear, with both sides offering competing judgements of the death toll. The UNHCR estimates that many tens of thousands of people – and possibly up to 100,000 people – have been displaced by the short, but bloody conflict. Although the conflict now appears to be over, the situation remains acutely fragile. Tensions remain high and the possibility of further conflict cannot be ruled out.

The current crisis in South Ossetia follows months of escalating tensions between the Georgian government in Tbilisi and the pro-Russian separatists as well as growing international acrimony between Tbilisi and Moscow. In the build-up to the crisis, Georgia accused Russia of stoking tensions in the region, of arming the separatists, and of violating its territorial integrity. In turn, Russia, which supports the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, accused Georgia of instigating the crisis and of planning the long-term subjugation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by force, in violation of its international agreements. Russia was also incensed by Georgia's recent application to join NATO, the eastwards expansion of which Moscow regards as an American-inspired bid to encircle the Russian state. With US-Russian relations already strained over American plans to construct a missile defence shield in Eastern Europe, commentators feared that the crisis in South Ossetia could, in the longer-term, lead to a renewed Cold War. Although the immediate military conflict between Tbilisi and Moscow appears to be over, the crisis could have profound consequences for Georgia. With Russia having clearly demonstrated its determination to remain the predominant actor in the energy-rich Caucasus region, the wider geo-political implications of the crisis may prove equally significant.

Against this background, this note examines the background to the current crisis in South Ossetia and the unfolding conflict between Georgia and Russia. It analyses what the conflict might mean for Georgia, its claim to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and its aspirations for joining NATO. It assesses the Russian response to the crisis and considers what it reveals about the broader objectives of Russian foreign policy under President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin. It also assesses the implications of the conflict for the West and its relations with Russia, which have deteriorated significantly in recent years.

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## 1 Background to the conflict

The conflicts in the Georgian breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been a continuing source of instability in the South Caucasus, and of friction between Tbilisi and Moscow, ever since Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union in April 1991. At the heart of the conflicts are the competing claims of territorial integrity and self-determination: Georgia claims sovereignty over both regions; the regions in turn assert their right to secede. Since major fighting between Georgian forces and secessionist rebels ended in South Ossetia in 1992 and in Abkhazia in 1994, both regions have remained legally within the Georgian state but, in practice, have been beyond the control of the Georgian government in Tbilisi. With the ceasefires providing no clear process for resolving the competing territorial claims, the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia have remained frozen since the early 1990s. Since the election of Mikheil Saakashvili as Georgian President, who came to power in January 2004 promising both a reassertion of Georgian sovereignty over the territories and a new pro-Western foreign policy, tensions between Tbilisi and the breakaway regions have risen sharply, as have tensions between Georgia and Russia. Throughout 2008 tensions have been particularly high with South Ossetia and Abkhazia citing both Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence as justification for seceding from Georgia, and with Georgia applying for membership of the NATO Alliance.

### 1.1 Georgia's political development: from the Soviet Union to Saakashvili

Situated on the Black Sea at the strategically important cross-roads between Europe and Asia, the small Caucasus republic of Georgia, with a population of some 4.4 million, has experienced a turbulent history. Although tensions between Georgia and Russia have escalated significantly in recent months, and have been particularly strained since the election of Mikheil Saakashvili as Georgian President in January 2004, the underlying origins of the current crisis date back to the early 1990s and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Aside from a short-lived period of independence following the First World War, when it seized the opportunity offered by the Bolshevik revolution to secede from the Russian empire, Georgia first became a modern independent state on 9 April 1991, in the dying days of the Soviet Union. For the preceding 70 years, the country had been a component part of the USSR, having been invaded by the Red Army and annexed by Russia in 1921. Unlike countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary, which ostensibly – if only theoretically – remained independent states throughout the Cold War, Georgia was fully assimilated into the USSR, first as part of a larger Socialist Republic of Transcaucasia, along with its neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan, and later, from December 1936, as a separate “sovereign” republic of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup>

Stalin's appeal for patriotic unity eclipsed Georgian nationalism during the war and diffused it in the years following, even though under Stalin – himself ethnically Georgian – the country was subject to the mass repression seen elsewhere the Soviet Union. Following Stalin's death in 1953, his successor Nikita Khrushchev introduced wide-ranging economic reforms which brought acute deprivation to Georgia. In March 1956, hundreds of Georgian students were killed when they demonstrated against Khrushchev. In the 1980s, economic reforms during the short-lived premiership of Yuri Andropov brought similar hardship to the Georgian economy. Even though it was later re-established, the removal of Georgian as the official state language in 1977 compounded Georgian alienation from Moscow.

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<sup>1</sup> George Tarkhan-Mouravi, “History (Georgia)”, *Europa World online*, Retrieved 11 August 2008 from <http://www.europaworld.com/entry/ge.hist>

The Georgian dissident movement, which first emerged in the late 1970s, gained ground with the ascent to power in Moscow in 1985 of the reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. As the Soviet Union experimented with increased openness and political and economic reorganisation under Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, so dissident and liberal ideas fused with a growing national consciousness in Georgia. Increasing Georgian nationalism, however, was considered a threat by the country's ethnic minorities, particularly the Abkhaz and Ossetians, who looked towards Moscow for support and demanded their incorporation into the Russian Federation, causing protests among ethnic Georgians.

Towards the end of the 1980s there were increasingly violent clashes between the Communist authorities, the resurgent Georgian nationalist movement and nationalist movements in Georgia's minority-populated regions, particularly South Ossetia. In April 1989, Soviet interior troops were used to break up a peaceful demonstration outside the modern day Parliament building in Tbilisi. Twenty Georgians were killed and hundreds wounded. The event radicalised Georgian politics prompting many – even some Georgian communists – to conclude that independence was preferable to continued Soviet rule. In October 1990, opposition pressure resulted in open, multiparty and democratic parliamentary elections, which were won by a coalition headed by the Georgian nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia. On 31 March 1991, Gamsakhurdia organised a referendum on independence which was approved by 98.9% of the votes. Georgia formally declared independence from the Soviet Union on 9 April 1991.

After declaring its independence, Georgia endured years of political instability and economic hardship. Accused of authoritarian and erratic rule, Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in a violent coup d'état by opposition militias in December 1991 and was forced to flee the country. In March 1992, the militias installed the Georgian former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in Gamsakhurdia's place. During Shevardnadze's 11 year presidency, and in the absence of the cheap energy supplies to which it had access during the Soviet period, Georgia's economy plummeted, leading to severe economic hardship and poverty. Crime was widespread and endemic corruption plagued Shevardnadze's government. Indeed, corruption further undercut the Georgian economy compounding the country's economic difficulties. With allegations that his family were involved in the corruption, Shevardnadze's popularity declined markedly in 2000 as did that of the ruling party, the Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG). Increasing divisions within the CUG between the older, former communist generation and the younger, energetic and reformist wing led to Shevardnadze resigning from the party leadership (though not the premiership itself) and, in November 2001, to the dismissal of his entire cabinet. A split within the party ensued, resulting in a dramatic loss of support for the pro-Shevardnadze core of the CUG. Indeed, in June 2002, the CUG was unable to achieve the 4% threshold of votes required to secure seats on Tbilisi City Council.

## **1.2 The Rose Revolution and the election of Mikheil Saakashvili**

Faced with such a profound collapse of popular support, the parliamentary and presidential elections, scheduled for 2003 and 2005 respectively, posed a clear threat to Shevardnadze's continued tenure as president. Although a crucial test of the country's continuing commitment to democratic transition, the parliamentary elections held on 2 November 2003 were widely perceived to have been fraudulent. Stoking popular frustration at the apparent electoral malpractice, and the widespread dissatisfaction with the state of the country's economy and endemic corruption, opposition leaders, including Mikheil Saakashvili, Shevardnadze's former Justice Minister, organised mass protests outside the Parliament building in Tbilisi,

resulting in the resignation of Shevardnadze on 23 November 2003. The Rose Revolution, as it became known, swept aside the existing government in a peaceful coup watched closely by the outside world and supported by the United States. Following new elections on 4 January 2004, Saakashvili was elected Georgian President with 96% of the votes cast.

Tackling corruption, reforming the government, and rehabilitating and liberalising the economy was at the heart of Saakashvili's domestic agenda. The economy received a strong impetus from the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude oil pipeline, which started operating in May 2006, and from the South Caucasus gas pipeline, which started operating in January 2007. Early efforts to promote economic growth resulted in 6% growth in 2004 and just under 10% annual growth in subsequent years. In foreign affairs Saakashvili made it an early priority of his presidency to ally Georgia closely with the West, with membership of NATO – the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – a central ambition. In this Georgia has received enthusiastic backing from the United States, which sees a democratic, Western-oriented Georgia as a positive example to other countries in the region. Saakashvili's "Euro-Atlantic" aspirations, however, have long angered Russia, which regards Georgia as part of Moscow's natural sphere of influence in the Caucasus region.

Since Saakashvili's election in 2004, relations between Georgia and Russia have grown increasingly strained, partly as a result of Georgia's pro-Western policies, particularly its NATO aspirations, and partly because of Saakashvili's other central policy objective upon assuming power, the reassertion of Georgian sovereignty over the pro-Russian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whose independence is supported by Moscow.

### **1.3 The unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

#### **South Ossetia**

The conflict in South Ossetia began in 1989 when local Ossetians, calling for greater autonomy and eventual reunification with the Russian province of North Ossetia, clashed with local Georgians. Troops from the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs were deployed in January 1990 but failed to defuse the situation. In September 1990, prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia, a step that was declared unconstitutional by the government in Tbilisi. A series of cease-fires were introduced to stem the growing violence between Georgia and South Ossetia, but the fighting continued, forcing several thousand people to flee.

In December 1991, following Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union, the South Ossetian legislature declared a state of emergency and a general mobilisation in response to Georgian moves to dispatch troops to the region. A second declaration of independence from Georgia was issued in December 1991 followed by a referendum in January 1992, in which the population of South Ossetia voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence. Fighting continued around Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, between the Georgian National Guard and unofficial Georgian militias on one side, and local Ossetian militias, reinforced by volunteers from North Ossetia, on the other. The Ossetians, backed by North Ossetia and Russian nationalists in Moscow, accused the Georgians of trying to force them to flee to the north. The Georgians, in turn, accused the Ossetians of wanting to detach South Ossetia from Georgia. Urban warfare in Tskhinvali lasted until June 1992, resulting in some 1,000

dead, 100 missing, extensive destruction of homes and infrastructure and tens of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people (IDP).<sup>2</sup>

In June 1992, Russia brokered a cease-fire. Signed at the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi, the cease-fire agreement – “the Agreement on the Principles of the Settlement between Georgia and Russia” – led to the creation of a 15km zone of conflict radiating from the centre of Tskhinvali. On the ground, the South Ossetian authorities maintained control over the districts of Tskhinvali, Java, Znauri, and parts of Akhalkgori. The Georgian government controlled the rest of Akhalkgori and several ethnic Georgian villages in the Tskhinvali district. The Sochi Agreement also set up the Joint Control Commission (JCC), a quadrilateral body with Georgian, Russian, North and South Ossetian representatives, plus participation from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The JCC was created to supervise the observance of the agreement, draft and implement conflict settlement measures, promote dialogue and political settlement, devise and carry out measures to facilitate refugee and IDP return, solve problems related to economic reconstruction in the zone of conflict, and safeguard human rights. In practice, the JCC's work has focused on three main issues, each with a working group: military and security matters, economic rehabilitation of the zone of conflict, and the establishment of conditions for the return of refugees and internally displaced peoples.

Under the Sochi agreement, a Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) was established in 1992 made up from a battalion of around 500 men from North Ossetia, Russia and Georgia. The JPKF is mandated to restore peace and maintain law and order in the zone of conflict and security corridor, as well as in districts and villages not in the zone of conflict. It also monitors provisions of the ceasefire agreement. A Russian Major-General is in overall command of the JPKF.

Despite the maintenance of the cease-fire, little progress was made on a political solution to the conflict and South Ossetia effectively became a seceded territory. For 12 years, political stalemate followed. Separatist voices became less strident during President Shevardnadze's rule in Georgia. The dispute over the status of South Ossetia remained unresolved and the conflict “frozen”.

### **Abkhazia**

In February 1992, the provisional Georgian Military Council announced Georgia's return to its 1921 constitution. The Abkhaz leadership was concerned that Abkhazia's status was not adequately taken into consideration and so a draft treaty outlining plans on federal relations was sent to Tbilisi. Tbilisi did not respond and in July 1992 the Abkhaz Parliament reinstated the 1925 Abkhaz constitution.

On 14 August 1992 Georgian armed forces entered the Gali region of Abkhazia, ostensibly to rescue thirteen government hostages and secure the rail line to Russia. However, the troops advanced towards Sukhumi and attacked Abkhaz government buildings. From summer 1992 to summer 1993 Georgian troops controlled much of Abkhazia, including Sukhumi, while fighting continued causing great civilian hardship. On 27 July 1993, Russia mediated an agreement in Sochi for a cease-fire and the phased demilitarisation of Abkhazia. However, on 16 September 1993, Abkhaz troops broke the cease-fire and opened an all-front surprise offensive from Gudauta, north of Sukhumi, with support from North Caucasus volunteers. After eleven days of intense fighting the separatist rebels controlled almost all of Abkhazia

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<sup>2</sup> “Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly”, *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report No 183, 7 June 2007, p.1

with the exception of the upper gorge of the Kodori river. Most ethnic Georgians fled. Georgian authorities claim – with the backing of several OSCE declarations – that this was the result of ethnic cleansing by Abkhaz forces.

The May 1994 Moscow Agreement, which formally ended the military conflict, was signed under UN auspices. The Moscow Agreement, facilitated by Russia, provided for a ceasefire, separation of forces and the deployment of the CIS Peacekeeping Force (CIS PKF). In June 1994, the entirely Russian CIS PKF deployed in the conflict zone and their mandate has never been modified. The Moscow Agreement also provides for UN monitoring, known as the UN Observer Mission to Georgia (UNOMIG), and currently there are 142 international military observers in the region. UNOMIG is responsible for monitoring and verifying the ceasefires, observing the operation of the CIS peacekeeping force.<sup>3</sup>

There has been little progress, however, on agreeing the outlines of a comprehensive political settlement based on a possible division of constitutional competences between Georgia and Abkhazia. Progress on the return of refugees and improving the security environment has also been slow. Although some Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the conflict have returned to Gali district, an estimated 200,000 IDPs remain in temporary accommodation, awaiting a political settlement that would guarantee their safety. The Georgian Government has often linked any political negotiation with the return of IDPs.

#### **1.4 Escalating tensions between Georgia and Russia, 2004 – 2008**

Even before the current crisis relations between Georgia and Russia had worsened seriously since 2004. Committed to political and economic liberalisation at home, pro-Western, Euro-Atlantic aspirations abroad and an commitment to restore Georgian sovereignty over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, President Saakashvili's agenda has been fundamentally at odds with the priorities of the Kremlin. Regarding Georgia's deepening ties with the West as a threat to its security, Moscow has, since 2004, sought to pressure Georgia by political, economic and military means.

Tensions in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and between Georgia and Russia, rose steadily after 2004. In October 2004, Georgia refused to recognise the presidential elections held in Abkhazia. In January 2005, Saakashvili offered South Ossetia a plan for eventual autonomy within Georgia. However, South Ossetia rejected the proposals, favouring complete independence from Tbilisi. Sporadic violence during 2005 and 2006 maintained tensions in the region. In May 2005, a shooting in South Ossetia resulted in the deaths of Georgian policemen and South Ossetian citizens. In January 2006, blasts on the Russian side of the border with Georgia cut gas and electricity supplies, a move the Georgian government claimed was a deliberate attempt to disrupt supplies. In July 2006, the Georgian Parliament called for the removal of Russian peacekeepers from both South Ossetia and Abkhazia and requested an international presence in their place. Two months later, in September, tensions flared when a helicopter carrying the Georgian Defence Minister was shelled in South Ossetia. In November, South Ossetia formalised its break with Tbilisi in a referendum. Georgia, which disputed the result, accused Russia of provoking a war by supporting South Ossetia. Tensions escalated further the following April when the Georgian Parliament created a separate provisional government in South Ossetia. In June, South Ossetia claimed Georgian troops had shelled Tskhinvali. In August, Georgia claimed Russia had invaded its airspace and attempted to destroy a radar station in a missile strike. In October 2007, talks on South Ossetia, facilitated by the OSCE, collapsed.

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations, [http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/2008/jun08\\_5.pdf](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/2008/jun08_5.pdf)

In 2008, the deterioration of relations between Georgia and Russia has been dramatic. Relations reached a new low following Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008 and NATO's pledge at the Bucharest Summit between 2 and 4 April 2008 that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become full members of the Alliance. In response, the Russian Parliament, the Duma, pushed for complete independence for Abkhazia and South Ossetia and took hearings on the possible recognition of both territories citing the "Kosovo precedent".<sup>4</sup>

On 16 April, following the Bucharest Summit, the outgoing Russian President, Vladimir Putin, announced that Russia would formalise its official ties with both territories, implying some form of legal recognition. Putin also ordered the government to "create mechanisms for the comprehensive defence of the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of Russian citizens living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia".<sup>5</sup>

On 20 April, separatist forces in Abkhazia claimed to have shot down an unmanned Georgian spy plane over their territory, bringing the total number shot down to four since March 2008. Georgia then released on-board video footage which, it claimed, showed that the drone was shot down by a Russian MiG-29 fighter jet. Georgian authorities further claimed that radar evidence showed that the Russian MiG had taken off from an airbase inside Abkhazia and had flown into Russia following the attack. An independent United Nations investigation broadly confirmed the Georgian version of events. In response, Saakashvili accused Russia of "unprovoked aggression against the sovereign territory of Georgia".<sup>6</sup> For its part, Russia argued that Georgia had been in breach of its agreements by flying the drone over Abkhazia in the first place.

On 25 April 2008, Russia's Ambassador-at-large, warned that Russia would protect its citizens in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia:

we will not leave our citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in difficulty, and this should be clearly understood [...] if a war is unleashed; we will have to defend our compatriots even through military means. We will use every means to do this; there should be no doubt about this.<sup>7</sup>

Four days later, Moscow deployed additional peacekeeping forces and military hardware to Abkhazia. On 30 May, Russia began to move troops into Abkhazia to work on the railway between Sukhumi and Ochamchira. Georgia protested, claiming that it represented an attempt by Moscow to annex the territory. In response, Georgia suspended bilateral talks on Russia's application to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

In early June, the separatist leadership in Abkhazia broke all ties with the Georgian government and on 14 and 15 June, following unsuccessful talks between Saakashvili and the new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, there were reports of an intensive exchange of fire on the outskirts of the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali. Days later, four Russian peacekeepers were detained by Georgian forces in Abkhazia for allegedly transporting illegal ammunition, a claim Moscow denied. Later the same month, Russia accused Georgian special forces of setting off explosions in Sukhumi market and against Russian peacekeepers on the Georgian-Abkhaz border. Further explosions in South Ossetia on 3 and

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<sup>4</sup> Resolution of the National Assembly of the Republic of Abkhazia", cited in "Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia", Europe Report No. 193, *International Crisis Group*, p.2

<sup>5</sup> "The Russian President's Instructions", Russian Foreign Ministry Press Release, 16 April 2008

<sup>6</sup> "Georgia-Russia tension escalates over downed drone", *New York Times*, 22 April 2008

<sup>7</sup> "Russian threatens Georgia with force over South Ossetia", *Reuters*, 25 April 2008



4 July prompted Russia to accuse Georgia of military intervention and of aggression against the territory. At the end of July, South Ossetia accused Georgia of shelling villages on the outskirts of Tskhinvali. Georgia, however, maintained that South Ossetian forces had directed fire against its monitoring group. Following an unsuccessful closed session of the United Nations Security Council on 22 July, tensions continued to rise, with further explosions in South Ossetia reported on 1 August. On the eve of the current conflict, on 7 August, Georgia claimed the South Ossetians were igniting a war while Russia called the situation “extremely dangerous”.<sup>8</sup>

## **2 The conflict between Georgia and Russia**

### **2.1 The conflict as it unfolded**

On 7 August 2008, Georgian troops launched a military offensive against pro-Russian separatist forces in-and-around Tskhinvali, capital of the Georgian breakaway territory of South Ossetia. The move came just one day after Georgia and South Ossetian rebel forces agreed to a ceasefire and to begin Russian-mediated talks intended to resolve their longstanding conflict. In an overnight assault Georgian forces mounted concerted air and artillery attacks against the separatists in response to what the Georgian government claimed were both separatist attacks on Georgian civilians in South Ossetia and direct aggression by Russia in the form of air raids by Russian military aircraft against Georgian villages in the territory. Shortly after the onset of hostilities on 8 August, the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, insisted that the Georgian offensive was a response to Russian aggression, and declared that:

Russia is fighting a war with us in our own territory. This is a clear intrusion on another country's territory. We have Russian tanks on our territory, jets on our territory in broad daylight.<sup>9</sup>

The offensive prompted fierce fighting between Georgian and separatist forces and between Georgian and Russian peacekeepers stationed in South Ossetia. While estimates of casualties of the Georgian offensive remain deeply contested by both sides, the initial fighting in-and-around Tskhinvali led to numerous civilian casualties as well as the deaths of 15 Russian peacekeeping forces. The South Ossetian rebel leader, Eduard Kokoity, accused Georgia of a “perfidious and base step”, while Russia charged Georgia with military adventurism in South Ossetia and of genocide against its people, many of whom are Russian passport-holders. In a statement on 8 August the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, said:

I must protect the life and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are. We will not allow their deaths to go unpunished. Those responsible will receive a deserved punishment.<sup>10</sup>

Russia's immediate response was to launch its own offensive military operations against Georgian troops in Tskhinvali and to deploy large numbers of additional troops and armour from Russia to South Ossetia. Justifying its actions on the need to protect its citizens and peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia, Russia further escalated its military campaign by carrying-out air strikes against economic and military targets well beyond the zone of conflict, within Georgia itself, including on the town of Gori, the strategically important oil and gas port of Poti on the Black Sea, and on targets on the outskirts of Tbilisi. The Russian attacks

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<sup>8</sup> BBC News, *Time-line: Georgia*, 12 August 2008

<sup>9</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>10</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

against Gori, in particular, are said to have resulted in a further significant loss of civilian life. Russia contests Georgian estimates of the civilian death toll and argues that these strikes within sovereign Georgian territory were necessary to degrade Georgia's ability to mount further attacks against the separatist forces. The UNHCR has estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 people had been displaced by the fighting in Georgia, including South Ossetia. Russia claims that a further 30,000 people have fled north to the Russian province of North Ossetia.

As the fighting intensified on 8 August Georgia announced the withdrawal of half of its contingent of 2,000 troops in Iraq to combat the Russian offensive (though Georgian troops had been due to return from Iraq in any case in summer 2008). The following day, 9 August, Georgian officials claimed that Russian air strikes against the town of Gori had hit residential areas, resulting in 60 civilian deaths. On the South Ossetian side, Russia and separatist forces put the civilian death toll at around 1,400. Georgian casualty figures, however, ranged from 82 dead – including 37 civilians – to around 130 dead. President Saakashvili, issued a presidential decree declaring a state of war with Russia, and accused Moscow of trying to destroy his country. President Saakashvili declared:

This is 100%, unprovoked brutal Russian invasion. This is about annihilation of a democracy on their borders. We on our own cannot fight with Russia. We want an immediate ceasefire, immediate cessation of hostilities, separation of Russia and Georgia and international mediation.<sup>11</sup>

Moscow, meanwhile, continued to accuse Georgian forces of genocide against the people of South Ossetia. The Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, stated that:

The actions of the Georgian powers in South Ossetia are, of course, a crime - first of all against their own people. The territorial integrity of Georgia has suffered a fatal blow.<sup>12</sup>

On 10 August, Georgia announced an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of its forces from South Ossetia, and claimed that Russian forces were in control of the regional capital Tskhinvali. Russia, however, claimed clashes with Georgian forces were continuing inside South Ossetia and intensified its military campaign. Russian warships were reported to have blockaded Georgian ports, including Poti, with wheat and fuel shipments blocked, a claim which Russia denied, arguing instead that the blockade was intended to prevent arms shipments to Georgia. On the same day, 10 August, pro-Russian separatist forces in Georgia's other breakaway region, Abkhazia, announced a full military mobilisation against Georgia and claimed to have sent 1,000 troops to drive Georgian forces from their last remaining stronghold in the region, the Kodori Gorge.

On 11 August, the conflict between Georgia and Russia escalated further as thousands of Russian troops entered Georgia from Abkhazia and raided the town of Senaki, well beyond the zone of conflict and deep within sovereign Georgian territory – a move Moscow said was intended to stop Georgia from attacking Russian forces in South Ossetia. Further Russian air strikes within Georgia were reported and Georgian officials claimed that Russian troops had seized Gori, a claim Russia denied and Georgia later appeared to retract. Russia, in turn, accused Georgia of breaking its own ceasefire and of continuing to attack separatist forces in the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali. The Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev repeated the claim that Georgian forces had been engaged in acts of genocide in South Ossetia:

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<sup>11</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>12</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

The ferocity in which the actions of the Georgian side were carried out cannot be called anything else but genocide, because they acquired a mass character and were directed against individuals, the civilian population, peacekeepers who carried out their functions of maintaining peace.<sup>13</sup>

The scale of the Russian military response prompted President Saakashvili to accuse Moscow of violating Georgian sovereignty, seeking to overthrow the country's fledgling democracy, and conducting a Cold War-era policy of domination in the Caucasus, likening Moscow's intervention to the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. He argued that Russia's actions amounted to "pre-planned, cold-blooded murder of a country".<sup>14</sup>

On August 12, reports emerged of further Russian air strikes against the Georgian town of Gori. There were reports that a hospital was among the buildings bombed. Officials in the Netherlands, meanwhile, confirmed that a Dutch television cameraman was among those killed in Gori and that a Dutch journalist had been injured in the attacks. The BBC reported that although there did not appear to be any Russian troops south of Gori, there were a number of burned-out and abandoned Georgian military vehicles on the roads around the town.

At a meeting with the Russian Defence Minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, and Chief of the General Staff, Nikolai Makarov, on 12 August, the President Medvedev, ordered an end to the Russian military operations against Georgia, but authorised Russian troops to quash any resistance from Georgian forces.<sup>15</sup> In a statement issued by the Kremlin, President Medvedev declared that:

The security of our peacekeepers and civilians has been restored. The aggressor has been punished and suffered very significant losses. Its military has been disorganised.

President Medvedev was particularly critical of President Saakashvili and disputed the latter's claim that Georgian troops had already ended their operations some two days earlier:

You know, the difference between lunatics and other people is that when they smell blood it is very difficult to stop them. So you have to use surgery. As for claims by the Georgian president that the ceasefire has been observed for two days - that's a lie. Georgian forces continued to fire at peacekeepers, unfortunately people were killed yesterday. There was no ceasefire from the Georgian side.<sup>16</sup>

## **2.2 Initial international responses**

President Medvedev's decision to cease military operations against Georgia on 12 August followed increasingly vocal criticism of the scale of Russia's military actions, particularly by the United States. At the outbreak of the violence, international responses to the unfolding crisis in South Ossetia focused principally on the need for all sides to show restraint and to cease military actions. On 9 August, President Bush warned of the risks of escalation:

The attacks are occurring in regions of Georgia far from the zone of conflict in South Ossetia. They mark a dangerous escalation in the crisis. The violence is endangering regional peace. Civilian lives have been lost, and others are endangered.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>14</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/sdocs/themes.shtml#205169>

<sup>16</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

This situation can be resolved peacefully. We've been in contact with leaders in both Georgia and Russia at all levels of government. Georgia is a sovereign nation and its territorial integrity must be respected. We have urged an immediate halt to the violence and a stand-down by all troops. We call for an end to the Russian bombings, and a return by the parties to the status quo of August the 6th.<sup>17</sup>

In a statement on 9 August the Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, declared that:

There is widespread concern about the escalating violence in Georgia.

British representatives on the ground and the media have reported that Russia has extended the fighting today well beyond South Ossetia, attacking the Georgian port of Poti, and the town of Gori, while Abkhaz forces have been shelling Georgian positions in the Upper Kodori valley. I deplore this.

The immediate priority for the international community is to stop the conflict. The responsibility on the Russian and Georgian governments is now clear. The offer of a ceasefire by the Georgian government is very welcome. We now look to the Russian Government to accept this offer and agree to an immediate ceasefire, in line with its international commitments to respect Georgian territorial integrity.<sup>18</sup>

A NATO statement issued on 8 August stated that:

The NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, is seriously concerned about the events that are taking place in the Georgian region of South Ossetia and said that the Alliance is closely following the situation.

The Secretary General calls on all sides for an immediate end of the armed clashes and direct talks between the parties.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, said:

I am deeply concerned over the dramatic situation in Georgia and I deplore the loss of human lives and the suffering inflicted on the civilian population. I spoke with Sergey Lavrov and Eka Tkeshelashvili and called on both to spare no efforts to obtain an immediate cease-fire. We will continue to work relentlessly with the parties and the international community, in particular the OSCE, to help find a peaceful way out of the crisis.<sup>20</sup>

Following Russia's military incursions into Georgia, particularly its land operations against Gori and Senaki on 11 August, international condemnation of Moscow's action grew increasingly strident. On 11 August, the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, said:

There is no justification for continued Russian military action in Georgia, which threatens the stability of the entire region and risks a humanitarian catastrophe. There is an immediate and pressing need to end the fighting and disengage all military forces in South Ossetia. The Georgian Government has offered a ceasefire, which I urge the Russians to reciprocate without delay.

There is a clear responsibility on the Russian government to bring this conflict quickly to an end. Continued aggression against Georgia - and especially an escalation of the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080809-2.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/press-release/2008/4807886/georgia-statement-080809>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-100e.html>

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/declarations/102220.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/declarations/102220.pdf)

conflict beyond South Ossetia - will only serve to damage Russia's international reputation and its relations with countries across the globe [...].<sup>21</sup>

Upon his return to Washington on 11 August, President Bush was particularly critical of Russia's incursions into Georgia. His statement was significantly stronger than his previous statement on 9 August, cautioning Russia against toppling the government of President Saakashvili, casting doubt on the underlying objectives of Moscow's military offensive, and warning of the potential damage a continuation of the violence would have on US-Russian relations:

I am deeply concerned by reports that Russian troops have moved beyond the zone of conflict, attacked the Georgian town of Gori, and are threatening [...] Georgia's capital of Tbilisi. There's evidence that Russian forces may soon begin bombing the civilian airport in the capital city.

If these reports are accurate, these Russian actions would represent a dramatic and brutal escalation of the conflict in Georgia. And these actions would be inconsistent with assurances we have received from Russia that its objectives were limited to restoring the status quo in South Ossetia that existed before fighting began on August the 6th.

It now appears that an effort may be underway to depose [Georgia's] duly elected government. Russia has invaded a sovereign neighboring state and threatens a democratic government elected by its people. Such an action is unacceptable in the 21st century.

The Georgian government has accepted the elements of a peace agreement that the Russian government previously said it would be willing to accept [...]

Russia's government must respect Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The Russian government must reverse the course it appears to be on, and accept this peace agreement as a first step toward resolving this conflict.

Russia's actions this week have raised serious questions about its intentions in Georgia and the region. These actions have substantially damaged Russia's standing in the world. And these actions jeopardize [...] Russia's relations with the United States and Europe. It is time for Russia to be true to its word and to act to end this crisis.<sup>22</sup>

### **2.3 The ceasefire agreement and the presence of Russian troops in Georgia**

President Medvedev's announcement on 12 August 2008 that Russian forces had fulfilled their mission and would cease their offensive came hours ahead of the arrival in Moscow of a European Union delegation headed by the French President – and current head of the EU – Nicolas Sarkozy. In discussions with President Medvedev, President Sarkozy succeeded in gaining the Kremlin's acceptance of an EU ceasefire plan. Under the proposals, subsequently agreed to by President Saakashvili and endorsed by EU Foreign Ministers at a special meeting on 13 August, both Georgia and Russia agreed to the following six principles to bring immediate hostilities to an end:

- Not to resort to force;
- To end hostilities definitively;

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page16047.asp>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080811-1.html>

- To provide free access for humanitarian aid;
- Georgian military forces to withdraw to their usual bases;
- Russian military forces to withdraw to the lines held prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Pending an international mechanism, Russian peace-keeping forces to implement additional security measures;
- Opening of international talks on the security and stability arrangements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>23</sup>

Commenting on the agreement, President Sarkozy emphasised the need for a durable settlement but also stressed the importance of securing an end to the immediate conflict:

We don't yet have peace. But we have a provisional cessation of hostilities. And everyone should be aware that this is considerable progress.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the ceasefire and, in particular, the agreement by Moscow that its forces would be withdrawn to the positions held prior to the conflict, Russian forces remained deep within Georgian territory. Reports over the following days suggested that far from withdrawing, Russian forces were continuing to advance and to entrench their positions within Georgia. On 13 August, President Saakashvili accused Moscow of failing to honour its commitments under the EU-brokered ceasefire agreement:

We are living in an Orwellian world where the Russian Federation accuses Georgia of genocide and ethnic cleansing and meanwhile they are doing it exactly right now... There was a temporary ceasefire, that was the understanding. From this morning there is large-scale movement of Russian weapons, of shooting, of armed incidents, rampages through different towns and villages of Georgia... Russian troops are in the process of completing ethnic cleansing of all Georgian-populated areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>25</sup>

The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, admitted that Russian forces were still near the Georgian towns of Gori and Senaki, saying they had to ensure the safety of civilians by dismantling ammunition and artillery left by the Georgian military. Media reports also stated that Russian troops were present at the port town of Poti on the Black Sea coast where a number of Georgian naval vessels had been sunk. Russian forces continued to remain far beyond South Ossetia's borders in Georgian territory and were reported to have occupied the central town of Khashuri, giving them control of all but one of the major towns on the highway across Georgia from the Black Sea to the capital Tbilisi. By 16 August there were reports that Russian tanks were just 35 kilometres from Tbilisi. The BBC reported that the Russian troops "do not look like they are pulling out - and in fact seem to have dug in".<sup>26</sup>

#### **2.4 The hardening of international responses towards Russia**

Russia's apparent reluctance to withdraw its forces promptly from Georgia, back to the positions they occupied on August 6 before the conflict began, has provoked a hardening of the international response to the crisis. The United States, which on 13 August announced that its military would begin a humanitarian mission to Georgia, has been particularly critical of Moscow and has warned of the damage to US-Russian relations that would follow should

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<sup>23</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the situation in Georgia*, 13 August 2008, para 2

<sup>24</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>25</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>26</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7551576.stm>

the Kremlin fail to honour the commitments agreed by President Medvedev. On 13 August 2008, President Bush said:

In recent years, Russia has sought to integrate into the diplomatic, political, economic, and security structures of the 21st Century. The United States has supported those efforts. Now Russia is putting its aspirations at risk by taking actions in Georgia that are inconsistent with the principles of those institutions. To begin to repair the damage to its relations with the United States, Europe, and other nations, and to begin restoring its place in the world, Russia must keep its word and act to end this crisis.<sup>27</sup>

The following day, the US Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice, warned that:

Georgia has been attacked. Russian forces need to leave Georgia at once. The world needs to help Georgia maintain its sovereignty, its territorial integrity and its independence [...] The free world will now have to wrestle with the profound implications of this Russian attack on its neighbour for security in the region and beyond.<sup>28</sup>

On 14 August, confronted by Russia's continuing military presence deep within Georgian territory, President Bush warned that Russia faced international isolation if it reneged on its commitments:

Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected. Bullying and intimidation are not acceptable ways to conduct foreign policy in the 21st century. A contentious relationship with Russia is not in America's interest and a contentious relationship with America is not in Russia's interest. Moscow must honour its commitment to withdraw its invading forces from all Georgian territory. Only Russia can decide whether it will now put itself back on the path of responsible nations or continue to pursue a policy that promises only confrontation and isolation.<sup>29</sup>

On 15 August, in the absence of a Russian withdrawal, President Bush reiterated his warning:

The United States and her allies stand with the people of Georgia and their democratically elected government. We insist that Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity be respected, and Moscow must honour its pledge to withdraw all its invading forces from Georgian territory.<sup>30</sup>

In a joint press conference with the Russian President in Sochi on 15 August, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel added her voice to the calls for Russia to withdraw its forces from Georgia:

I found some of Russia's actions disproportionate and in particular think the presence of Russian troops in Georgia proper is not sensible - and so I believe that the six-point plan must be realised immediately and the Russian troops should withdraw from Georgia proper.<sup>31</sup>

Angered by Russia's apparent refusal to withdraw, President Saakashvili declared:

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<sup>27</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>28</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>29</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>30</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>31</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

One thing should be made very clear, Georgia will never give up any square kilometre of its territory. No matter what happens we will never reconcile with the fact of annexation or indeed separation of parts of territory from Georgia, with the attempts to legalise ethnic cleansing and with the attempts to bring Georgia to [its] knees and undermine our democratic system.<sup>32</sup>

On 17 August, the United States stepped up its pressure on Moscow to respect the ceasefire agreement. Condoleeza Rice further warned that:

I hope [President Medvedev] intends to honour the pledge this time... people are going to begin to wonder if Russia can be trusted... Russia overreached, used disproportionate force against a small neighbour and is now paying the price for that because Russia's reputation as a potential partner in international institutions, diplomatic, political, security, economic, is frankly, in tatters.<sup>33</sup>

A statement issued by the Kremlin on 17 August stated that Russia would withdraw its forces but warned that Georgia must also honour its commitments under the ceasefire:

From tomorrow, Russia will begin withdrawing its military forces that are supporting Russian peacekeepers... [Medvedev] underlined the need for the unconditional and strict fulfilment by the Georgian side of the return of its military units to their permanent positions.<sup>34</sup>

### **3 Implications for Georgia**

Although the immediate military conflict between Tbilisi and Moscow appears to be over, the crisis could have profound consequences for Georgia – the position of its president Mikheil Saakashvili, its claims of sovereignty over the breakaway territories South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and its ambitions for joining NATO. With Russia having clearly demonstrated its determination to remain the predominant actor in the energy-rich Caucasus region, the wider geo-political implications of the crisis may prove equally significant.

#### **3.1 The position of President Saakashvili**

Since he swept to power in January 2004, President Saakashvili has enjoyed a commanding position in Georgian politics. Although he secured a much reduced share of the vote in the January 2008 presidential elections – down from 97% to 53% – he has remained popular as well as powerful. Indeed, while opposition politicians accused Saakashvili of authoritarian tendencies following his violent suppression of anti-government protests in November 2007, Saakashvili himself has heralded his reduced winning margin in 2008 as proof that Georgia's democracy has matured. In a speech in Washington DC in March 2008, he said the election demonstrated that "Georgia has become a real democracy [...] nobody will ever get high 70s and 80s [again] because [Georgia's] society has become diverse, pretentious, as it should be in a normal democracy, demanding and much more pluralistic".<sup>35</sup> How the conflict with Russia will affect President Saakashvili's political position, however, is one of the key questions to emerge from the crisis.

On 12 August 2008, thousands of Georgians demonstrated on the streets of Tbilisi in support of President Saakashvili. However, there have also been reports that some Georgians – particularly those in Gori most affected by the Russian offensive – have criticised their

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<sup>32</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>33</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>34</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>35</sup> Speech by President Saakashvili to the Atlantic Council of the United States, 19 March 2008



president. For its part, Russia has declared that will not work with Saakashvili in future. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, stated that:

Our position is that Mr Saakashvili cannot be our partner, and the best thing would be if he left office. I don't think Russia will be in a mood to conduct negotiations or even talk with Mikeil Saakashvili.<sup>36</sup>

Lavrov, however, rejected suggestions that one of Russia's objectives in the conflict had been to topple President Saakashvili. Although relations between Saakashvili and Vladimir Putin are widely reported to have been characterised by bitter animosity, the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, stated that:

Regime change is purely an American invention [...]; we never apply this terminology in our political thinking and certainly we are all for democracy in Georgia, and it's interesting that our American colleagues chose to bring up publicly this idea of President Saakashvili stepping down.<sup>37</sup>

Writing in the *Financial Times* on 15 August, Philip Stephens argued that "Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili badly miscalculated in thinking he could reclaim [South Ossetia] by force. The hot-headed Mr Saakashvili is no innocent in this grim affair".<sup>38</sup> Although Saakashvili has long received the strong backing of the United States, it has been reported that some European leaders are "lukewarm" in their support of the Georgian president.<sup>39</sup>

Commentators have suggested that the conflict could well undermine President Saakashvili's position. An article in *The Guardian* on 13 August concluded that "Saakashvili will struggle to survive". It argued that a settlement which allowed Russian troops to remain in Abkhazia and South Ossetia would "leave [...] the 40-year old Georgian president wounded, perhaps fatally".<sup>40</sup> The same day, an article in the *Financial Times* argued that President Saakashvili's position was "in doubt". It suggested:

The fact that Russia hates him so much is a big factor in Mikheil Saakashvili's favour in Georgia, but the outcome of the conflict could severely weaken his five-year domination of Georgian politics. If he is blamed for precipitating the Russian onslaught, Georgians could turn against him [...]

Even if he survives, his ratings could dive. While Mr Saakashvili has nearly five years of his term left, he could step down or be removed by a snap vote, or possibly by another revolution. Anything seems possible in today's Georgia.<sup>41</sup>

Writing in the *New Statesman* on 16 August, Misha Glenny also questioned Saakashvili's ability to hold onto power, particularly if the Georgian economy – the growth of which has been Saakashvili's greatest success – falters. Arguing that Saakashvili's removal would likely prompt a return to the political fragmentation of the 1990s, Glenny suggests that:

Georgia's decision to seize large parts of Tskhinvali [...] was a disastrous political miscalculation, even in an era that is increasingly defined by spectacularly poor judgement [...]

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<sup>36</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>37</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>

<sup>38</sup> "The vulnerabilities that lie behind Putin's belligerence", *Financial Times*, 15 August 2008

<sup>39</sup> "War in the Caucasus: What happens next: A rout. Now the political calculations change", *The Guardian*, 13 August 2008

<sup>40</sup> "War in the Caucasus: What happens next: A rout. Now the political calculations change", *The Guardian*, 13 August 2008

[U]nder the influence of an energetic lobby in Washington, and with considerable support from Israeli weapons manufacturers and military trainers, Saakashvili and the hawks around him came to believe the farcical proposition that Georgia's armed forces could take on the military might of their northern neighbour in a conventional fight and win [...]

Saakashvili is now very vulnerable [...] After only a week, the Georgian economy is teetering [...] And if the wheels do come off the economy, it is hard to see how Saakashvili might salvage his political position – such a combination of economic distress and military defeat is usually fatal. If he goes, Georgia is likely to fracture politically into a variety of fiefdoms familiar from the 1990s and living standards will plummet.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, on 16 August *Time* magazine reported that Georgia had been:

lulled [...] into believing that US troops would rush to its defence. Now there is a furious sense of betrayal.<sup>43</sup>

An article in the *Financial Times* on 13 August, meanwhile, called Georgia's assault on Tskhinvali "a spectacularly ill-conceived military adventure by Mikeil Saakashvili".<sup>44</sup>

The *Financial Times* reported that two of Mr Saakashvili's political rivals could stand against him. Levan Gachechiladze, the man Saakashvili defeated at the polls in January 2008, has declared that the recent conflict was the fault of Saakashvili:

What happened in Georgia, from the Georgian side, is 100 percent the responsibility of Saakashvili. When you know Russia is ready to do such things, [you should] try everything to prevent it.<sup>45</sup>

Another reported contender for the Georgian presidency is Nino Burjanadze, until recently an ally of Saakashvili and the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament. Burjanadze has stated that while the conflict with Russia is ongoing Georgians should remain united behind Saakashvili. However, she is also reported to have said that "I may proceed with forming my own political party sooner than expected. We need new political ideas".<sup>46</sup>

At this early stage, commentators appear to agree that it is hard to predict what might happen to President Saakashvili. Having been re-elected in January 2008 to a second term, Mr Saakashvili has almost five years in office remaining. Much is likely to depend on whether, after their initial outrage at the Russian offensive, the Georgian people conclude that Mr Saakashvili's decision to launch his 7 August offensive against South Ossetia rebels was justified. If they agree with his actions, his position may prove secure. If they decide that Mr Saakashvili led Georgia into conflict with Russia recklessly without adequate preparation, his political fate might be sealed.

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<sup>41</sup> "Saakashvili's grip on power in doubt", *Financial Times*, 13 August 2008

<sup>42</sup> Misha Glenny, "Superpower swoop: What Russia and America are really doing in Georgia", *New Statesman*, 16 August 2008

<sup>43</sup> "The bear is back on the prowl", *Time*, 16 August 2008

<sup>44</sup> "The message from Moscow: Resurgent Russia bids to establish new status quo", *Financial Times*, 13 August 2008

<sup>45</sup> Cited in "Saakashvili's grip on power in doubt", *Financial Times*, 13 August 2008

<sup>46</sup> Cited in "Saakashvili's grip on power in doubt", *Financial Times*, 13 August 2008

### **3.2 The future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia**

The future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is equally hard to predict. For the time being, the ceasefire brokered by President Sarkozy and agreed by Moscow and Tbilisi stipulates that Georgian forces must “withdraw to their usual bases” and that Russian forces must “withdraw to the lines held prior to the outbreak of hostilities”. Yet the agreement also allows Russian peace-keeping forces to “implement additional security measures” in South Ossetia. Finally, in the longer term, the agreement envisages the “opening of international talks on the security and stability arrangements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia”.<sup>47</sup> Negotiations on any kind of final settlement in either territory are likely to be some way off. However, some commentators suggest that the conflict makes it less likely that Georgia’s claim to sovereignty over Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be realised. In an article on 16 August, *The Economist* argued that “Mr Saakashvili, who promised to reintegrate the country when he was elected president, has made this prospect all but unattainable”.<sup>48</sup> For its part, Russia has said that the conflict means that Georgian troops “are never again going to appear as part of a peacekeeping contingent in South Ossetia”. *Time* magazine anticipated that “having humiliated Georgia militarily, Moscow is now likely to push harder for independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia”.<sup>49</sup> The European Union has said that it is ready to send monitors to help implement a ceasefire in Georgia, but that it wants a corresponding UN resolution first.

### **3.3 The prospects for Georgian membership of NATO**

#### **Georgian aspirations to join NATO**

Since his election in January 2004, President Saakashvili has made it his overriding foreign policy objective to take Georgia into NATO as a full member of the Atlantic Alliance. For Georgia, NATO membership offers a means of breaking away from its Soviet past once and for all. Fearful of Russia’s intentions towards Tbilisi and throughout Caucasus, Georgia sees NATO membership as a means of protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as a means of guaranteeing its fledgling democracy. With NATO membership come political and security guarantees, above all NATO’s Article V mutual defence clause, which Georgia sees as invaluable in preserving its independence from Moscow. Under Article V, all NATO countries would be committed to defending Georgia in the event of a Russian attack on the country. Within Georgia, Saakashvili’s bid for NATO membership received widespread support. In a referendum in January 2008, held concurrently with the presidential election, 73% of Georgians agreed that the country should join the Alliance. Ahead of NATO’s Summit at Bucharest in April 2008, President Saakashvili made clear his hopes that Georgia would be granted a Membership Action Plan (MAP), the first step on the road to full membership of the Alliance.

Even before the Bucharest Summit, however, there existed deep divisions between the allies on whether Georgia should be offered membership of NATO. The United States has been a strong supporter of President Saakashvili and of Georgia’s aspirations for membership of the Alliance. In a speech in Bucharest 2 April 2008, on the eve of the NATO Summit, President Bush declared that both Georgia and Ukraine should be granted a Membership Action Plan, setting out a course for both countries to become full members of the Alliance:

Here in Bucharest, we must make clear that NATO welcomes the aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine for their membership in NATO and offers them a clear path

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<sup>47</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the situation in Georgia*, 13 August 2008, para 2

<sup>48</sup> “Russia and Georgia: A scripted war”, *The Economist*, 16 August 2008

<sup>49</sup> “The bear is back on the prowl”, *Time*, 16 August 2008

forward to meet that goal. So my country's position is clear: NATO should welcome Georgia and Ukraine into the Membership Action Plan. And NATO membership must remain open to all of Europe's democracies that seek it, and are ready to share in the responsibilities of NATO membership.<sup>50</sup>

Germany and France, however, were far more sceptical, warning of the dangers of provoking Russia. Ahead of the Summit, on 1 April 2008, the French Prime Minister, François Fillon, said that France opposed US plans to invite either Georgia or Ukraine to join NATO:

France will not give its green light to the entry of Ukraine and Georgia. We think that is not the correct response to the balance of power in Europe, and between Europe and Russia.<sup>51</sup>

The UK maintained a median position, broadly favouring Georgia's admission into NATO but not actively pushing for it. In evidence to the Defence Select Committee's March 2008 inquiry into the Future of NATO and European Defence the Ministry of Defence stated that "the UK continues to support Georgia's long-term Euro-Atlantic aspirations". On 8 January 2008, the Defence Secretary, Des Browne, said that:

My view about Georgia, or indeed any other country, is that countries who meet NATO's performance based-standards [and] are willing to contribute to Euro-Atlantic security ought to be able to aspire to membership.<sup>52</sup>

Russia, however, has long been fiercely opposed to the prospect of either Georgia or Ukraine joining NATO, the eastwards expansion of which it regards as an American attempt to encircle and weaken the Russian state. Ahead of the Bucharest Summit the then Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that the expansion of NATO to include former members of the Soviet Union represented a "direct threat" to Russia's security. Similarly, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigory Karasin, told the Duma – the Russian Parliament – that any decision to admit Georgia or Ukraine would provoke a crisis in relations between Moscow and both Tbilisi and Kiev and a "crisis [which] will also affect in the most adverse way pan-European security".<sup>53</sup> Prior to assuming office, Mr Putin's successor, Dmitry Medvedev, said:

We are not happy about the situation around Georgia and Ukraine [...] We consider it extremely troublesome for the existing structure of European security. No state can be pleased about having representatives of a military bloc to which it does not belong coming close to its borders.<sup>54</sup>

At the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, the Alliance rejected Georgia's application for a Membership Action Plan (MAP), the stage prior to full membership of NATO, but, significantly, agreed that both Georgia and Ukraine would eventually be admitted into the Alliance. The Heads of Government decided that the Alliance would "begin a period of intensive engagement" to chart the both countries' applications for membership. The Declaration, issued on 3 April 2008, said that:

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<sup>50</sup> President Bush, Speech at the National Bank of Savings, Bucharest, Romania, 2 April 2008, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080402-2.html>

<sup>51</sup> "Bush tells alliance to ignore Kremlin's bluster and bring in new members", *The Times*, 2 April 2008

<sup>52</sup> Des Browne in evidence to the Defence Committee, Defence Committee, Eighth Report of Session 2007-08, *The Future of NATO and European Defence*, HC 111, para 188

<sup>53</sup> "Bush tells alliance to ignore Kremlin's bluster and bring in new members", *The Times*, 2 April 2008

<sup>54</sup> "Medvedev warns against NATO admission for Russian neighbours", *The Guardian*, 25 March 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/25/russia.ukraine>

NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations. We welcome the democratic reforms in Ukraine and Georgia and look forward to free and fair parliamentary elections in Georgia in May. MAP is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership. Today we make clear that we support these countries' applications for MAP. Therefore we will now begin a period of intensive engagement with both at a high political level to address the questions still outstanding pertaining to their MAP applications. We have asked Foreign Ministers to make a first assessment of progress at their December 2008 meeting. Foreign Ministers have the authority to decide on the MAP applications of Ukraine and Georgia.<sup>55</sup>

Speaking after the Summit, the Georgian Foreign Minister, David Bakadze, warned against giving Russia a *de facto* veto over Georgian membership of the Alliance. He said that "If NATO starts to compromise with any third party, however important that party might be, then it will not be NATO". However, he welcomed NATO's pronouncement that Georgia would one day become a member of the Alliance. Mr Baradze argued that the Bucharest Summit Declaration "represents a historic breakthrough in relations between Georgia and the alliance".

An article in the *Financial Times* on 15 April 2008 commented that:

It would be nice to believe that the argument about expanding NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine was purely about principle. But, in reality, it is also about power.

If NATO ultimately decides to admit these two countries to the alliance, it will be taking a calculated risk. The risk may be a small one. But it is not unreasonable to do a little more calculation before taking it.<sup>56</sup>

### **The implications of the conflict for Georgia's NATO application**

The conflict between Georgia and Russia and the rising tensions between Russia and the West are likely to have profound implications for Tbilisi's longstanding efforts to secure Georgia's membership of NATO. Already highly controversial within NATO even before the current crisis, the question of what to do about Georgia's aspirations to join the Alliance is one of the most significant issues to emerge from the current crisis over South Ossetia. For some, Russia's role in provoking the crisis, its overwhelming military response, particularly the infringement of Georgian sovereignty and reluctance to withdraw its forces following the ceasefire, demonstrate clearly a new assertiveness in Russian foreign policy and a determination by Moscow to maintain its hegemony in the Caucasus region from which Georgia needs protection. According to this argument, had Georgia been a member of NATO, Russia would have been deterred from intervening. For others, however, the recent conflict demonstrates the dangers inherent in admitting to NATO a country with unresolved territorial disputes. According to this latter argument, had Georgia been a member of NATO, the Alliance would have been drawn into a direct confrontation with Moscow over small territories of little strategic importance to the West. NATO membership would thus have risked escalating the conflict into a full-scale East-West confrontation. In the aftermath of the crisis, these competing arguments about whether Georgia should be admitted into NATO are likely to intensify. However, there is little doubt that Georgia's ambitions for NATO membership have been a longstanding source of tension between Tbilisi and Moscow.

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<sup>55</sup> Bucharest Summit Declaration, 3 April 2008, <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-049e.html>

<sup>56</sup> "Power and Russia's backyard", *Financial Times*, 15 April 2008

For President Saakashvili, Russia's actions during the recent crisis in South Ossetia demonstrate the need for Georgia to become a member of NATO. If Georgia is left out of NATO, Saakashvili claims, it will set a precedent for Russian dominance in the South Caucasus.

In a joint press conference with President Saakashvili in Tbilisi on 15 August 2008, US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice suggested that the US remained committed to Georgia's application for a NATO Membership Action Plan. She said:

the United States will be with its allies, of course, in the North Atlantic Council of NATO on Tuesday. I'm certain that there will be a confirmation of NATO's transatlantic vision for Georgia as well as for Ukraine, of NATO's insistence that it will remain open to European democracies that meet its standards.<sup>57</sup>

In media interviews on 17 August, Dr Rice maintained that:

the NATO Alliance has made clear in the Bucharest declaration that Georgia and Ukraine will be members of NATO. What the United States is advocating for right now with others is [that] they – the Georgians and Ukrainians [-] would become part of something called the Membership Action Plan, which is not membership, but it is an umbrella under which numerous states of Eastern and Central Europe have been able to resolve their differences, have been able to make important domestic reforms, civil military relations, reform their militaries. That's what we're advocating. We continue to believe that that would be important for Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>58</sup>

Writing in the *Financial Times* on 13 August 2008, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, however, argued that Georgia was trying to draw the West into a direct confrontation with Moscow which highlighted the dangers of granting the country membership of the Alliance. Echoing Vladimir Putin's claim at the beginning of the conflict that "Georgia's aspiration to join NATO... is driven by its attempt to drag other nations and peoples into its bloody adventures", Lavrov said that:

Mikheil Saakashvili [...] has stated that "unless we stop Russia, unless the whole world stops it, Russian tanks will go to any European capital tomorrow", adding on a separate occasion that "it's not about Georgia any more. It's about America". It is clear that Georgia wants this dispute to become something more than a short if bloody conflict in the region. For decision-makers in the NATO countries of the west, it would be worth considering whether, in future, you want the men and women of your armed services to be answerable to Mr Saakashvili's declarations of war in the Caucasus.<sup>59</sup>

Most commentators appear to agree that the recent crisis in South Ossetia makes it less likely that Georgia will become a member of NATO in the short-term.

An article in *The Economist* on 16 August argued:

[A]lthough Mr Saakashvili's foolishness makes admitting Georgia harder, Russia's incursion should not delay plans to let Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. Russia's aggression will make those countries, and others, keener than ever on joining. The

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/08/108289.htm>

<sup>58</sup> Condoleeza Rice, Interview on Fox News, 17 August 2008, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/08/108299.htm>

<sup>59</sup> Sergei Lavrov, "Why Russia's response to Georgia was right", *Financial Times*, 13 August 2008

worst outcome of this war would be for the West to allow Russia a veto over any sovereign country's application for membership of either NATO or the EU.<sup>60</sup>

There remain arguments both for and against granting Georgia a Membership Action Plan for eventual membership of NATO. On the positive side, admission into NATO might consolidate Tbilisi's commitment to Western-style democracy. If successful, this could have a significant influence on the rest of the region, encouraging additional former Soviet countries in Eurasia to move towards democracy. Georgia's admission into NATO would also be beneficial to the West because of the country's geo-strategic position. Georgia is a major energy transit country which, although it does not have oil or gas reserves of its own, lies between the energy-rich Caspian Basin and the Black Sea and hosts the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline which runs from Azerbaijan to Turkey. In addition, Georgia has shown itself willing to commit its forces on NATO military operations in Afghanistan and has also shown its willingness to deploy forces overseas as part of the US-led Coalition in Iraq. A final argument is that to insist upon the resolution of the frozen conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia before Georgia is allowed to join the Alliance would, in effect, give Russia a veto over a NATO decision. To accept such a veto, if only informally, could have wider significance in the region, implying that certain areas fall under Moscow's natural sphere of influence.

Critics of Georgia's aspirations to join NATO question the country's commitment to democracy. Since declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia has never had a peaceful, democratic change in leadership. Although Saakashvili was re-elected in January 2008 in elections which OSCE observers deemed fair, commentators point to Saakashvili's violent suppression of anti-government protesters in November 2007 as evidence of the president's authoritarian tendencies. Georgia, some claim, still has some way to go before it can claim to be a mature and stable democracy. The other argument against Georgia membership of the Alliance, of course, are the frozen conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. As the recent crisis has demonstrated, by admitting Georgia into the Alliance, NATO would assume ultimate responsibility for those conflicts, something several European countries are said to be reluctant to do.

Deciding how to proceed with Georgia's application for membership of NATO is one of the key challenges facing the United States and Europe over the coming months. Georgia's application is due to be considered again at the meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in December 2008, as agreed at the Bucharest Summit. NATO will consider its response to the conflict between Georgia and Russia at a special meeting of the North Atlantic Council on 19 August 2008.

## **4 Implications for regional stability**

### **4.1 Ukraine and the Caucasus**

Russia's invasion of Georgia has significant implications for regional stability in Ukraine and throughout the Caucasus. By its actions in Georgia, Moscow demonstrated its willingness to employ military power to achieve its regional strategic objectives. Through Georgia runs the only oil pipeline to Western Europe that does not pass through Russia and over which Russia does not exercise control. By asserting its military muscle in Georgia, Russia has shown a determination to control the vast oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Sea. Moreover, Georgia, like Ukraine, has historically been part of the so-called Russian sphere of influence. In Ukraine, as in Georgia, live a large numbers of ethnic Russians; Crimea only

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<sup>60</sup> "Russia resurgent", *The Economist*, 16 August 2008

became part of Ukraine under Stalin having previously been part of Russia. The Kremlin has long opposed Ukrainian membership of NATO on the same grounds that it opposed Georgian membership. With Ukraine, however, the stakes are higher still. Many commentators have interpreted Russia's recent incursions into Georgia as a warning to Ukraine and its pro-Western president, Viktor Yushenko. According to Misha Glenny, through its actions in Georgia:

Russia is placing a marker on Ukraine. Do not, Moscow says, even think of allowing Ukraine into NATO, otherwise what we have seen in Georgia will be child's play. So the West will have to think hard about how to play Ukraine's application to join the military alliance.<sup>61</sup>

Russia's actions have been widely interpreted as a bid by Moscow to impose a new status quo in the Caucasus. An article in the *Financial Times* on 13 August, argued that:

In attacking an American ally that was being considered for NATO membership – and getting away with it – the Kremlin has demonstrated that Russia is the dominant power in its region [...]

Few doubt that Georgia is the first in a series of moves to re-establish Moscow's control over the former Soviet Union [...]

Having established the precedent of defending Russian citizens by the use of military force [...] the Kremlin could put the same divide-and-rule techniques to use in Crimea [...] in ethnically Russian northern Kazakhstan, or in the Baltic states with large Russian minorities.<sup>62</sup>

For its part, Ukraine reacted to the crisis in Georgia by pledging support for President Saakashvili. On 13 August 2008, President Yushchenko announced that new restrictions would be placed on the use of the Crimean port of Sevastapol by Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Yushchenko's announcement required Russian naval vessels, which have been involved in imposing the Russian naval blockade of Georgia, to request permission ten days in advance before returning to the port which Russia leases from Ukraine. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry warned that Russian naval vessels would not be allowed to return to the port at all if they had been involved in military operations against Georgia. There are longstanding tensions between Ukraine and Russia over Sevastapol. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and Ukraine signed an agreement which allowed Russia to base the Fleet at the port until 2017. Yushchenko has insisted that the Fleet vacate the base when the lease expires but some Russian politicians have urged the Kremlin not to surrender control of the base, regardless of Ukraine's wishes. Tensions between Russia and Ukraine further escalated on 16 August 2008 when Kiev offered the United States its Soviet-built satellite system as part of Washington's missile defence shield.<sup>63</sup>

In response, Russia is said to have begun distributing passports in Crimea to ethnic Russians, further raising tensions between Kiev and Moscow. An article in *The Daily Telegraph* on 18 August 2008 reported that:

Ukraine is investigating claims that Russia has been distributing passports in the port of Sevastapol, raising fears that the Kremlin could be stoking separatist sentiment in the

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<sup>61</sup> Misha Glenny, "Superpower swoop: What Russian and America are really doing in Georgia", *New Statesman*, 16 August 2008

<sup>62</sup> "The message from Moscow: Resurgent Russia bids to establish a new status quo", *Financial Times*, 13 August 2008

<sup>63</sup> "Ukraine raises heat with missile offer to US", *The Sunday Telegraph*, 17 August 2008



Crimea as a prelude to possible military intervention. The allegation has prompted accusations that Russia is using the same tactics employed in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to create a pretext for a war.<sup>64</sup>

The deepening tensions between Russia and Ukraine raise the spectre of further conflict in the region, particularly if Ukraine continues with its bid to secure membership of NATO, and a growing rift between Russia and the West. An article in *The Times* on 16 August, for example, argued that:

This new East-West conflict is likely to intensify [...] If the West was surprised by the ferocity of Russia's actions in Georgia, the struggle over Ukraine will be far more intense. Many Russians regard their western neighbour as part of their homeland, a view shared by many Russian speaking Ukrainians. Moscow and Kiev are already locked in a bitter dispute about the future of the Black Sea Fleet base at Sevastopol. NATO membership would exacerbate the row. Any outbreak of violence could have huge repercussions [...] This conflict [in Georgia] threatens to trigger a struggle that, if badly handled, could consume an entire continent.<sup>65</sup>

#### 4.2 Russian threats against Poland

On 14 August 2008, in the wake of the crisis in Georgia, the United States and Poland agreed a preliminary deal to site interceptor missiles for the the US missile defence shield on Polish soil.<sup>66</sup> Although the US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice emphasised that the deal was not a response to the crisis in Georgia, nor aimed at Russia, the timing of Poland's agreement to proceed with the plans was seen by commentators as a direct response to the conflict. Poland has been particularly critical of Russia's actions in Georgia and its president stood in solidarity with President Saakashvili in Tbilisi alongside the presidents of the Baltic states to demonstrate their support for Georgia. Russia responded to the agreement by saying that the US plans would undermine the global balance of power between the United States and Russia and would put Poland at risk of nuclear attack by Moscow. General Nogovitsyn, the Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff, declared that Russian military doctrine allowed Moscow to use nuclear weapons "against the allies of countries having nuclear weapons if they in some way help them". The Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, said that the timing of the deal between the US and Poland exposed the "fairytale" that the US missile defence shield was aimed at rogue states rather than against Russia. President Medvedev said, "The deployment of new anti-missile forces has as its aim the Russian Federation".

US plans to construct a missile defence shield in Eastern Europe are longstanding, as are US-Russian tensions over the plans. In July 2008, the US and the Czech Republic signed a Treaty allowing the US to construct a radar station South West of Prague. Under the plans, which are expected to cost around \$3.5 billion, the radar and associated sensors would detect an enemy missile in flight and guide a ground-based interceptor to destroy it. Hailing it as a "landmark agreement" at the official signing ceremony in Prague on 8 July 2008, the US Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice, said that:

This is an agreement that is supported by our NATO allies [...] because missile defenses today are aimed only at those who would threaten us. They are not like the

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<sup>64</sup> "Kremlin is accused of stoking separatist unrest in Ukraine by distributing passports", *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2008

<sup>65</sup> "A catastrophe in the making", *The Times*, 16 August 2008

<sup>66</sup> For background on the US missile defence shield, see Library Standard Note SN/IA/4378

missile defenses of the Cold War period, which were caught up in discussions about strategic stability. We've made the point to our Russian colleagues that we all face the threat from states like Iran that continue to pursue missiles of ever-longer range, and we must be in a position to respond. And so with our Czech allies, we are able to do that today, with our NATO allies, we have been able to secure agreement that this is important to NATO, and that all of these agreements will come together in an architecture that will help defend us all [...]

We face, with the Iranians, and so do our allies and friends, a growing missile threat that is getting ever longer and deeper, and where the Iranian appetite for nuclear technology, to this point, is still unchecked.<sup>67</sup>

The second element of US missile defence plans – the stationing of 10 missile interceptors on Polish territory – had been thrown into after Warsaw rejected the terms offered by Washington. Poland was said to be intent on holding out for a deal in which the United States would offer to station US Patriot missiles in the country on a permanent basis, further aid to modernise its military, and US security guarantees. Zbigniew Chlebowski, the parliamentary leader of the Polish Civic Platform party, said at the time that “without a security guarantee, the missile defence shield would not be installed in Poland.

Despite the difficulties the US initially encountered in reaching a deal with Poland, Moscow was fiercely critical of the US-Czech missile defence treaty, warning that if the plans were implemented Russia would be forced to make a military response. The Russian Foreign Ministry said that the country would react “not through diplomatic but through military-technical means”:

There is no doubt that bringing elements of the US strategic arsenal close to Russian territory could be used to weaken our deterrent potential [...] In such a situation the Russian side will take appropriate measures to compensate for potential created for threats to its national security. But that is not our choice.

We will follow developments intently, as before remaining open to constructive dialogue both about missile defence and the whole range of questions on strategic stability, but exclusively on an equal basis [...] When it comes to any development of the situation we will proceed from the necessity to provide for the security of our own state.

Following the Czech decision to sign the missile deal with the US, Russia cut its oil supplies to the Czech Republic by almost a half. Russia argues that the reasons for the cut are purely technical resulting from supplier problems, but some in the Czech Republic, which gets around 70 percent of its oil from Russia, fear that Russia's move was politically motivated, amounting to energy blackmail akin to Moscow's suspension of gas supplies to Ukraine in 2006 following a price dispute. Valdas Adamkus, the president of Lithuania, described Russia's move as unequivocally “political”.<sup>68</sup>

Russia has long opposed the US missile defence plans. In his first major foreign policy speech on 15 July 2008, the new Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, like Putin before him, adopted a hard line on the US plans. In a tone which many commentators suggested was reminiscent of Mr Putin, Mr Medvedev denounced the US plans and warned that they threatened the stability of the European security architecture. He stated that:

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<sup>67</sup> Condoleeza Rice, Remarks with Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg at Ballistic Missile Defence Agreement Signing Ceremony, 8 July 2008, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/07/106764.htm>

<sup>68</sup> Russia cuts oil supply after Czechs sign deal for US radar base, *The Telegraph*, 15 July 2008

We strongly affirm that the deployment of elements of the global US missile defence in Eastern Europe only exacerbates the situation [...] we will be forced to respond in kind. Our American and European partners have also been warned about this. We are convinced that national security cannot simply be maintained on the basis of good faith.

This is linked to Russian-American agreements on strategic stability. Obviously this common heritage will not be able to survive if one party is permitted to selectively destroy individual elements of this strategic regime. We cannot agree to that.<sup>69</sup>

Following the US-Czech deal in July, press reports indicated that Russia was considering further retaliation by using bases in Cuba for its long-range nuclear bombers. On 21 July, *Izvestiya* reported that a “highly placed military source” had said that the Kremlin wanted to use Cuba as a base for its Tu-160 and Tu-95 strategic nuclear bombers. The paper quoted the source as saying, “While they are deploying the anti-missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, our long-range strategic aircraft already will be landing in Cuba”. *Izvestiya* also reported that facilities were also being considered in Venezuela, whose president, Hugo Chavez, agreed to increase military cooperation with Moscow in a meeting with Medvedev and Putin on 22 July 2008.<sup>70</sup> The suggestion that Russian nuclear bombers could use Cuba as a base raised the spectre of a second Cuban missile crisis. A spokesman for the Russian Defence Ministry, however, denied that Russia had any such plans.

Beyond Russia’s threatening actions over Poland’s decision to sign up to the US plans on 14 August 2008, it is not clear how Moscow will react. One possible response could be the cutting of oil and gas supplies to Poland as happened with the Czech Republic. An article in *The Times* on 16 August commented that:

Moscow has used apocalyptic language before, and so no-one is seriously suggesting that Warsaw or Krakow will become smoking ruins any time soon. But the Polish move, and the Russian threat, provide the clearest evidence yet that the six-day Georgian war has spread to Eastern Europe’s ancient fault lines.<sup>71</sup>

## **5 Implications for the relationship between Russia and the West**

### **5.1 The conflict and the direction of Russian foreign policy**

Russia’s response to the crisis in South Ossetia must be seen in the context of the longer term trends in Russian foreign policy. During the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia increasingly sought to reassert itself on the international stage. Throughout the 1990s, Russia had been largely preoccupied by internal domestic matters, dealing with the wide-ranging political and economic changes which swept the country following the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the country heavily dependent on international donors – particularly the United States and Europe – for its domestic rehabilitation, Moscow was unable, and not inclined, to pursue a foreign policy which differed fundamentally from that of its donors. The result was that, during the 1990s, Russian foreign policy was largely subservient to domestic policy, or absent entirely, compounding the country’s decline as a global strategic actor.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> President Medvedev, Speech at the Meeting with Russian Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives to International Organisations, 15 July 2008, [http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2008/07/15/1121\\_type82912type84779\\_204155.shtml](http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2008/07/15/1121_type82912type84779_204155.shtml)

<sup>70</sup> ‘Nuclear bomber base’ raises fears of a new Cuban crisis”, *The Times*, 25 July 2008; Russia may use Cuba to refuel nuclear bombers, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2008

<sup>71</sup> “A catastrophe in the making”, *The Times*, 16 August 2008

<sup>72</sup> Eugene B Rumer, *Russian Foreign Policy Beyond Putin*, Adelphi Paper 390, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2007, pp.13-14

Putin's overriding objective as President was to restore Russian pride at home and status abroad. Domestically, this meant ensuring the country's economic and political stabilisation. Internationally, it involved restoring the country's place as a strategic actor on the world stage. In recent years, Russia has reasserted itself strongly, voicing – sometimes forcefully, often bluntly – distinctive policy positions on issues such as the expansion of NATO, the fate of Kosovo, and US plans to site a missile defence system in Eastern Europe. In the West, the growing disquiet over Moscow's increasingly assertive foreign and defence policies has been reinforced by the Kremlin's withdrawal from the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe – a key Cold War agreement – and by its resumption of symbolically significant military manoeuvres including naval patrols in the Mediterranean, strategic nuclear bomber patrols over Western Europe and the Atlantic, and overt displays of military hardware in Red Square, last witnessed during the Cold War.

In the context of a resurgent and increasingly confident Russia, Medvedev's election to the Kremlin in March 2008 had been seen as a key moment in Russia's international relations, a moment when Russia further embedded the shift to a more forthright foreign policy or adopted a more conciliatory approach. Despite the cautious optimism in the West which greeted his election, Medvedev has adhered to Putin's foreign policy stance, criticising NATO expansion, Kosovo's independence, US missile defence plans and, most importantly, by deploying Russian troops to Georgia.<sup>73</sup> In fact, the conflict between Russia and Georgia has suggested that Putin remains in charge of the direction of Russian foreign policy. An article in *The Economist* on 16 August argued that:

The war in Georgia has demonstrated convincingly who is in charge in Russia. Just as the war in Chechnya helped Mr Putin's rise to power in 1999, the war in Georgia may now keep him in power for years to come. As Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Moscow Centre argues, if Mr Medvedev still had a chance to preside over a period of liberalisation of Russia, this opportunity is now gone. The war in Georgia will make Russia more isolated. Worst of all, it will further corrode the already weak moral fabric of Russian society, making it more aggressive and nationalistic. The country has been heading in the direction of an authoritarian, nationalistic, corporatist state for some time. The war with Georgia could tip it over the edge.<sup>74</sup>

A further article in *The Economist* argued that:

This brutal and efficient move was a victory for Vladimir Putin [...] not just over Georgia but also over the West, which has been trying to prise away countries on Russia's western borders and turn them democratic, market-oriented and friendly. Now that Russia has shown what can happen to those that distance themselves from it doing so will be harder in future [...]

This was no sudden response to provocation, but a long-planned move. Mr Putin resents the West's influence in former Soviet countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, and he dislikes the puckish Mr Saakashvili intensely. He may not yet have ousted him [...] But by thumping down Russia's military fist in the Caucasus, he has made clear that Russia will not tolerate excessive signs of independence from its neighbours, including bids to join the NATO alliance.

Russia's growing assertiveness in foreign policy has been noted by commentators for several years. Vladimir Putin's speech to the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 is widely seen as a turning point in Russia's relationship with the outside world. In Munich,

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<sup>73</sup> Medvedev Speech, 15 July 2008

<sup>74</sup> "Russia and Georgia: A scripted war", *The Economist*, 16 August 2008

Putin accused the United States of attempting to create a “uni-polar world” with “one single centre of force and one single master”, which Russia considered “unacceptable” and “impossible in today’s world”.<sup>75</sup>

Whilst noting the often strident anti-Western rhetoric, Andrew Monaghan, of the NATO Defence College, argued that under Putin there has been a change in Russian foreign policy “from a defensive approach founded on Russian weakness at the beginning of Putin’s presidency through to a more confident but still insecure stance”. Writing before the conflict with Georgia, Monaghan suggested that:

Russian diplomacy reflects renewed confidence, but continuing insecurity; alongside renewed strengths there remains considerable weakness [...]

There is still a realisation in Moscow that Russia cannot afford a confrontation with the West. Yet an effort to reconsider and, as far as possible, renegotiate the results of the post-Cold War period has become increasingly visible.<sup>76</sup>

On that basis, the conflict between Georgia and Russia could be part of a broader effort by Moscow to change the status quo on its borders and to frustrate the expansion of NATO into areas which the Kremlin regards as Russia’s natural sphere of influence.

## 5.2 Towards a new Cold War?

In a statement in Washington on 13 August 2008, the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, said of the conflict between Georgia and Russia that “this is not 1968, where Russia can threaten a neighbour, occupy a capital, overthrow a government and get away with it”. Dr Rice’s reference to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush the reformist government of Alexander Dubcek revealed not only the historical parallels the United States was drawing with Moscow’s recent offensive against Georgia, but also the apparent difficulties of framing an effective Western response to the crisis. In 1968, as Dr Rice eluded, beyond condemnation of Russia’s actions there was little the West could do to prevent the brutal suppression of the “Prague Spring”, as Dubcek’s reform programme was known. Soviet tanks entered Czechoslovakia, toppled Dubcek and installed a pro-Kremlin regime in Prague, signalling to rest of Eastern Europe Moscow’s determination to maintain its tight control over the region and warning others about the consequences of any future defiance. In Georgia in 2008, commentators suggest the West has no greater capacity to intervene. The parallels between Russia’s recent actions in Georgia and the events of 1968, as well as particularly Moscow’s threatening response to Poland’s agreement to host the US missile defence shield, have led commentators to predict the imminent onset on a new Cold War.

There can be no doubt that East-West relations have soured considerably as a result of the conflict between Georgia and Russia, particularly given Moscow’s overwhelming military response to the crisis, its incursions into sovereign Georgian territory and its apparent reluctance to withdraw promptly its forces. Whether these heightened tensions presage a new Cold War remains unclear.

Several commentators and academics argue that analogies with the Cold War are inaccurate. Sceptics highlight the fact that while the Cold War did involve considerations of geo-strategic and security calculations, it was also a conflict between ideologies and conflicting political systems, with the West seeking to expand democracy and the Soviet

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<sup>75</sup> Putin speech at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Security Conference

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Monaghan, “‘An enemy at the gates’ or ‘from victory to victory’? Russian foreign policy”, *International Affairs* 84:4 (2008), pp.718-19

Union seeking the export of communism. These commentators suggest that, despite the obvious parallels, the ingredients of a new Cold War do not presently exist. They point to the fact that on many of today's key international challenges, Russia and America have compelling reasons to work cooperatively.

In an article in *The Daily Telegraph* on 16 August Adrian Blomfield argued that “[the] Kremlin is full of bluster and puffed-up nationalism but this is a long way from being a return to the Cold War”. He maintains that:

The talk of a new Cold War is growing ever louder. Yet, even now, that description is fallacious, not least because history rarely repeats itself so precisely.

Beyond self-aggrandisement and nationalism born from an over-confidence built on energy resources, Russia has no ideology to export. Nor, despite a rapidly growing military budget and the restoration of a long-range bomber patrols, does it have the military might of the Soviet Union. [...]

The theatre of international relations will have the scenery of the Cold War. But the play being staged is much more likely to resemble the Great Power diplomacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, Rupert Cornwell writing in *The Independent* on 16 August maintains that events in Georgia do not presage a return of the Cold War. Arguing that America is now weaker, economically, militarily, and morally than at the end of the Cold War, and that Russia is comparatively stronger, thanks not least to its vast energy resources, Cornwell maintains that:

[A] reduced imbalance between the old superpower rivals does not translate into a new Cold War, in which Russia offers itself as the Soviet Union redux, an opposite pole and social model for the entire world. What we are witnessing is a reversion to pre-20<sup>th</sup> century great power politics, featuring not just a somewhat creaky US and resurgent Russia, but emerging actors such as China, India and, who knows, maybe Europe as well. In Moscow's case, its current great-power behaviour is fuelled by resentment and a desire for payback, after the humiliations of the Yeltsin era – on a playing field that is now tilted in its direction [...] In short, spheres of influence are back.<sup>78</sup>

To some degree, this analysis reflects that of Richard Sakwa, Professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent at Canterbury and Associate Fellow of Chatham House. In an article entitled “‘New Cold War’ or twenty years’ crisis?”, published in March 2008 before the conflict between Georgia and Russia, Professor Sakwa rejected the suggestion that the course of Russian foreign policy presaged a new Cold War with the West. Arguing that a resurgent and increasingly confident Russia was attempting to find its place in the international system, Professor Sakwa argued that while “Cold War patterns of thinking have once again surfaced in discussion about Russia and its role in the world”:

the conditions for a replay of the old Cold War in its classic form are simply not present. Russia and America do not lead rival ideological projects on a global scale; although disagreements over such issues as the appropriate role of multinational mechanisms do exist, they exist also between NATO allies. Nor are there sustained and entrenched policy differences over such issues as nuclear proliferation, global warming or any number of other fundamental issues facing the world. Russia is just

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<sup>77</sup> “Kremlin is full of bluster and puffed-up nationalism but this is a long way from a return to the Cold War”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 2008

<sup>78</sup> “The return of the great powers”, *The Independent*, 16 August 2008

one among a number of potential great powers, and therefore old-fashioned bipolarism is a thing of the past, and Russian-American relations are no longer the axis on which world politics turns.<sup>79</sup>

If the recent conflict between Georgia and Russia does not herald the emergence of a new superpower conflict, it could nevertheless be seen to have reinvigorated NATO, the organisation created to fight the Cold War. Earlier this year, as allied leaders prepared for the Bucharest Summit, commentators had suggested the Alliance had lost its purpose. In evidence to the Defence Select Committee in October 2007, Professor Michael Cox of the London School of Economics argued that “something fundamental changed because of the end of the Cold War” in that it “removed a single magnetic north in [NATO’s] strategic thinking”. In the Cold War, NATO has been “a clearly focused European alliance”. By contrast, argued Dr Dana Allin of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, in the post-Cold War world, NATO’s purpose had become “more fuzzy”. Although a number of plausible explanations of NATO’s role could be offered, “they are not as obviously compelling in the fundamental way that mutual defence against the Soviet threat was”. As a result, Dr Mark Webber, of Loughborough University, argued that there was “a considerable degree of uncertainty as to what [NATO’s] current role and purpose is”.<sup>80</sup>

An article in *The Times* on 18 August 2008, however, suggested that the conflict in Georgia had shown that NATO “is as relevant as ever”. It argued that:

NATO will be 60 next year – past retirement age for most personnel under its command. Until the Georgian war, retirement, to many, seemed an option for NATO itself [...] In Europe, polls taken before the August 8 invasion of Georgia found that decreasing numbers of taxpayers thought NATO vital for security [...]

August 8 provided a moment of clarity. The impunity with which Moscow ordered heavy armour into Georgia showed that the principle of collective security on which NATO is based remains the only serious guarantee of its members’ borders. It showed that Russia seeks nothing less than a veto on further NATO expansion. And it showed that the price of denying Russia that veto could be very high: absent the threat of mutually assured destruction, the notion that an attack on one NATO member state is an attack on all, to be resisted by all, now seems more likely to lead to conflict than at any time since the Cold War.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Richard Sakwa, “‘New Cold War’ or twenty years’ crisis: Russia and international politics”, *International Affairs* 84: 2 (March 2008), p.266

<sup>80</sup> Defence Committee, Eighth Report of Session 2007-08, *The Future of NATO and European Defence*, HC111, para. 42-43

<sup>81</sup> “The future of NATO”, *The Times*, 18 August 2008

Appendix: Map of Georgia



Source: BBC News