



Georgia after the 2008 war

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- Long the object of imperial rivalries, Georgia has returned to the unfortunate role of battle ground since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.
 - The US has increased its influence in the country since then, assisting the Georgian armed forces and investing in an important oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline which delivers Caspian oil to a Turkish port without crossing Russian territory.
 - Russia sees the country as part of its “zone of privileged interest” and resists US influence. The US-Russian struggle reached a decisive point in April 2008, when NATO decided not to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan which would lead to full membership of the organisation, largely due to European fears that such a move would anger Russia.
 - In August 2008, after sporadic clashes between Georgian forces and separatists from the breakaway region of South Ossetia, Georgian forces entered South Ossetia, aiming to return South Ossetia and the other breakaway region, Abkhazia, to the Georgian fold. Russia responded by sending in troops and both Russian and Georgian warplanes bombed targets in both South Ossetia and Georgian-controlled territory. The conflict was seen as at best miscalculation by the Georgia’s President Saakashvili, leading to increased Russian recognition of South Ossetia’s and Abkhazia’s independence.
 - Saakashvili’s second term expires in 2013. Whether the election is won by a more Moscow-friendly successor will be critical for the progress of Russia’s efforts to establish its “zone of privileged interest”. Critics of the US administration may say that Obama’s decision to “press the reset button” on relations with Russia has betrayed Georgia’s ambitions to join western countries.

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1 Background

Georgia is a country of some 4 million people lying just to the south of the strategically important Caucasus Mountains. In the 19th Century Russian forces sought to gain control of the mountains to protect the otherwise flat and vulnerable Russian Empire from attack from the south. After the Russian Revolution, Georgia briefly achieved independence but it was soon afterwards incorporated by force into the Soviet Union.

When the Soviet Union broke up at the beginning of the 1990s, Georgia voted massively for independence in a referendum. The new state, however, was not stable and came very close to failing in the first years of the 1990s. There were uprisings in Abkhazia. and the first government, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia only lasted until 1992, when it was overthrown and replaced by one led by former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. This was followed by uprisings in western Georgia in favour of Gamsakhurdia.

After disputed parliamentary elections in November 2003, the Shevardnadze government was brought down in the “Rose Revolution”, amid accusations of corruption and nepotism. In 2004 re-run parliamentary and presidential elections resulted in victory for Mikheil Saakashvili and his party, the National Movement-Democratic Front. Pro-western Saakashvili, a graduate of Columbia University law school who worked in the West, vowed to end corruption, deregulate the economy, move the country towards western institutions such as NATO and the EU, and restore Georgia’s territorial integrity by re-incorporating the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

For several years Mr Saakashvili was referred to as the “darling of the West”, as the Georgian economy responded well to reform. In late 2007, however, there were major

demonstrations and riots as the government was accused of corruption. Police used tear gas to break up the demonstrations and closed opposition media outlets. There were also allegations from a former minister, later retracted, that Mr Saakashvili had been involved in ordering contract killings. The events damaged Mr Saakashvili's reputation both at home and abroad.

The country continues to struggle to escape from Russian influence. In 2006, a Museum of the Soviet Occupation was opened in Tbilisi, to the reported annoyance of the then Russian President Vladimir Putin, and a museum to Joseph Stalin, the former Soviet leader, is being changed to give a more realistic account of Stalin's activities. In June 2010, a statue of Stalin was removed from his birth place, the town of Gori. Russia boycotts many Georgian imports, including wine and mineral water for claimed safety reasons, and has sharply increased the price of Georgia's gas imports, destabilising the economy.

2 Elections 2008

With the President's image tarnished by the previous year's disturbances and allegations, some observers were expecting the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2008 to be challenging for the governing National Movement-Democratic Front.

In the event, however, the snap presidential election in January 2008 resulted in a clear victory for Mr Saakashvili, who gained more than twice as many votes as his nearest rival. The Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe sent an observer mission, which found that:

...while the election was in essence consistent with most OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections, it also revealed significant challenges which need to be addressed urgently. Although this election represented the first genuinely competitive post-independence presidential election, shortcomings were noted. The campaign was overshadowed by widespread allegations of intimidation and pressure, among others on public-sector employees and opposition activists, some of which were verified by the OSCE/ODIHR EOM [election observer mission].¹

In the parliamentary election in May of the same year, Mr Saakashvili's obtained nearly 60% of the votes and 119 out of the 150 parliamentary seats.² The opposition claimed that the election was rigged. An OSCE observer mission concluded in its report that:

...overall, these elections clearly offered an opportunity for the Georgian people to choose their representatives from amongst a wide array of choices. The authorities and other political stakeholders made efforts to conduct these elections in line with OSCE and Council of Europe commitments.³

However, the mission "identified a number of problems which made this implementation uneven and incomplete."⁴

¹ OSCE, Georgia Extraordinary Presidential Elections, 5 January 2008: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, 4 March 2008, Summary

² Civil Georgia website: [CEC Releases Final Vote Tally](#)

³ OSCE, [Final Report on the 21 May 2008 parliamentary elections in Georgia](#), 9 September 2008, Summary

⁴ Ibid.

Overall, Mr Saakashvili emerged from the elections with his position strengthened, although his decisions that followed the victory suggest that a different result, one that weakened Saakashvili, might have been better for Georgia.

3 Local elections 2010

The local elections in 2010 were the first electoral test of support for Saakashvili since the disastrous 2008 conflict. Despite criticism that he had been foolish to confront Russia, Saakashvili's United National Movement won over 65 percent of the vote. Once again, the OSCE was invited to observe the election, and reported that the election was broadly in line with democratic standards, though there were problems:

The municipal elections marked evident progress towards meeting OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections. However, significant shortcomings remained including deficiencies in the legal framework, its implementation, an uneven playing field, and isolated cases of election-day fraud. The authorities and the election administration made clear efforts to pro-actively address problems. Nevertheless, the low level of public confidence, noted in previous elections, persisted. Further efforts in resolutely tackling recurring misconduct are required in order to consolidate the progress and enhance public trust before the next national elections.⁵

4 Conflict with Russia

In February 2008, Kosovo declared its independence, which was recognised by EU and NATO member states. In March 2008, the separatist government in Abkhazia asked the United Nations to recognise its independence, without success, leading to calls of inconsistency by the Russian Government. In March Russia announced that it would no longer apply Commonwealth of Independent States sanctions to Abkhazia, and in April, a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle was shot down over Abkhazia, with the parties disputing who shot the vehicle down.

In April 2008, a NATO summit in Bucharest deferred a decision on Georgia's application to join until December, under pressure from France and Germany, keen to avoid antagonising Russia. The US administration had been in favour of issuing Georgia with a Membership Action Plan immediately. Russia, however, continued to make some provocative moves in relation to South Ossetia, including adding to the number of Russian peacekeeping troops posted there.

Throughout first half of 2008, there were sporadic incidents of unrest in and around both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In August 2008, increased violence led the Georgian President to announce that he intended to regain control of South Ossetia, and a military offensive was launched to capture the capital of the region, Tskhinvali. Georgian troops shelled the capital, causing severe damage and many casualties.

Russia responded by quickly crushing the Georgian troops. Russian warplanes destroyed much of Georgia's military infrastructure within Georgian-held territory in Georgia, and Russian troops also pushed beyond the South Ossetian border into Georgia "proper", bombing and subsequently occupying the strategic town of Gori, and causing many casualties. Russian troops had also entered Abkhazia and from there destroyed Georgian

⁵ OSCE, Georgia municipal elections 30 May 2010, [Election observation mission report](#), September 2010, Summary

military bases near Abkhazia and took control of the port of Poti. There were naval clashes in the Black Sea off Abkhazia in which Georgian forces came off worse.

4.1 EU-brokered ceasefire

By 17 August, the parties had signed a peace plan brokered by President Sarkozy of France and troops gradually started to retreat to earlier positions, though not without further outbreaks of conflict. Under the six-point plan, the parties agreed:

- (1) Not to resort to force
- (2) To end hostilities definitively
- (3) To provide free access for humanitarian aid
- (4) Georgian military forces will have to withdraw to their usual bases
- (5) Russian military forces will have to withdraw to the lines held prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Pending an international mechanism, Russian peace-keeping forces will implement additional security measures;
- (6) Opening of international talks on the security and stability arrangements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁶

4.2 EU Monitoring Mission to Georgia (EUMM)

In September 2008, the EU set up a mission to monitor compliance with the terms of the six-point plan.⁷ It only operates in territories that are controlled by the Georgian side, however. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where Russian military control has been established, do not allow access to the Mission. The issue of extension of the monitoring zone is raised periodically at multilateral talks in Geneva. As well as its monitoring function, the EUMM also runs an Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism service, which provides a channel for communication for the parties to discuss and defuse incidents that might lead to conflict. At present this mechanism functions in Abkhazia but not in South Ossetia.

Head of the mission is Mr Hansjörg Haber.

4.3 Recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

On August 26, 2008, Russia officially recognized both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Only Nauru, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have followed Russia in recognising the independence of the enclaves.

4.4 Refugees

About 220,000 people were forced out during conflicts that took place in the early 1990s. The 2008 conflict added some 26,000 people to the overall number of displaced, of whom some 20,000 ethnic Georgians remain forcibly displaced.⁸ Georgia accuses Russian and South Ossetian forces of engaging in ethnic “cleansing” by forcing so many Georgian civilians to flee the disputed enclaves. Some 6% of the Georgian population is made up of internally displaced persons.⁹

⁶ Extraordinary meeting, General Affairs and External Relations Council, [Press release](#), 13 August 2008

⁷ For more information about the mission, see its [website](#)

⁸ International Crisis Group, [South Ossetia, the burden of recognition](#), 7 June 2010

⁹ Amnesty International, [In the waiting room: Internally displaced people in Georgia](#), August 2010

The treatment of these people by the Georgian authorities has raised concern, as many of them have been forced to leave the cities and take up residence in rural areas where there is no work.

Amnesty international has called on Georgia to do more to protect the refugees' human rights and on the international community to cooperate more actively with the Georgians on the matter.¹⁰

There are also many Ossetian refugees in Russia.

The UK government's assistance for those displaced by the conflict was set out last year in a parliamentary answer:

In response to the conflict in August 2008 the Department for International Development (DFID) initially committed £2 million to humanitarian agencies providing assistance to affected civilians in Georgia and the Russian Federation (RF). Of this £1 million was allocated to the International Committee of the Red Cross for their operations in Georgia and North Ossetia in the RF. £550,000 was allocated to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), £250,000 was given to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and £200,000 to the Hazardous Areas Life-Support Organisation (HALO). In December 2008, DFID provided a further £2 million humanitarian aid to be channelled through UNHCR. This provided Internally Displaced People (both pre and post 2008 conflict) with "winterised" shelter and continued access to basic provisions.¹¹

4.5 Military forces in Georgia

Russia has been accused of failing to comply with the terms of the Sarkozy plan. It has maintained a larger number of troops in the regions than warranted under the agreement, and has kept forces on a large swath of land that was previously controlled by Georgia. With a compliant Abkhazia, Russia controls strategic access to the Black Sea and with over 5,000 military personnel based in South Ossetia, only 30 miles from the Georgian capital, it can threaten the Tbilisi government.

In February 2010, Russia agreed with the separatist Abkhaz government to establish an army base on the territory. The pact envisaged the deployment of about 1,700 Russian troops for at least 49 years.

In August, Russia announced that it had deployed the advanced S300 surface-to-air missiles in Abkhazia, and another missile system in South Ossetia. The move provoked an angry reaction from the Georgian government, which claimed that the missiles violated the six-point ceasefire plan.¹²

Russia points to the agreement's clause allowing Russia's peacekeeping forces to implement further security measures. Russia also claims that agreements with the regions, which Russia recognises as independent states, supersede commitments that Russia made to withdraw troops.

The Bush administration made a direct declaration that the terms of the ceasefire agreement had not been complied with by the Russian forces, but the initial reaction from the Obama

¹⁰ Amnesty International, *In the waiting room: Internally displaced people in Georgia*, August 2010

¹¹ HC Deb 21 October 2009, c1495W

¹² "Russia Moves Missiles Into Breakaway Georgian Region", *New York Times*, 12 August 2010

administration was more muted. Lord Howell of Guildford indicated the UK government's position on the matter in a debate in July 2010:

At present Russia is not complying with its commitment to evacuate Georgia, where it still has troops, as well as South Ossetia and Abkhazia. We are all the time raising this issue and pressing the Russians to get into a more acceptable and positive position but progress is slow. At the moment they are not moving.¹³

5 Geneva talks

An international forum was set up after the conflict to foster negotiations between the parties. The forum is jointly chaired by the UN, the EU and the OSCE and brings together representatives of the Georgian and Russian governments and of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian administrations and the US administration. The 13th round of meetings was held on 14 October 2010, and it was announced that Russia had agreed to pull out of a village on the Georgian side of the South Ossetia boundary. South Ossetian representatives, however, boycotted a meeting on humanitarian concerns because the UN General Assembly had backed a Georgian draft document on the refugee situation.

In a joint statement after the latest meeting, the co-chairs of the forum said that "The overall situation was assessed as relatively calm, but fragile."¹⁴

6 Clinton visit to Tbilisi in 2010

In July 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a tour of Eastern Europe, visiting Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. During the visit she made clear the continuing US support for the Georgian Government's position regarding Russia:

I want to say publicly what I have said privately. I came to Georgia with a clear message from President Obama and myself. The United States is steadfast in its commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United States does not recognise spheres of influence...

We continue to call for Russia to abide by the August 2008 cease fire commitment signed by President Saakashvili and President Medvedev, including ending the occupation and withdrawing Russian troops from South Ossetia and Abkhazia to their pre-conflict positions.¹⁵

She said that the US "can walk and chew gum at the same time", suggesting that, despite Mr Obama's policy of resetting relations between the US and Russia, the US would continue to look after the interests of states within Russia's claimed sphere of influence.

7 Outlook

The Georgian authorities remain worried that they are being sacrificed by the US in the interests of bigger policy objectives, such as Russian cooperation in the Security Council over Iran. With the recent reinforcements of Russian military positions in the breakaway republics, Russia's economic influence, and bearing in mind the fate of the Ukrainian "colour revolutionary" Viktor Yushchenko, many analysts agree that Saakashvili has good reason to worry.

¹³ HL Deb, 26 July 2010, c1146

¹⁴ "Joint Statement Of OSCE And UN Released After Geneva Talks", *Prime News Agency*, 15 October 2010

¹⁵ US Department of State, [Joint Press Availability With Georgian President Saakashvili](#), Hillary Rodham Clinton, Tbilisi, 5 July 2010

In a June 2010 report, the International Crisis Group focussed on damage limitation, dialogue, the control of corruption and the defence of the human rights of displaced people, as well as calling for the terms of the six-point ceasefire plan to be respected.¹⁶

8 Map



¹⁶ See the full report here: International Crisis Group, [SOUTH OSSETIA: THE BURDEN OF RECOGNITION](#) Europe Report N°205, 7 June 2010