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GEORGIA & RUSSIA: THE “UNKNOWN” PRELUDE TO THE “FIVE DAY WAR”

COMMENT BY
Martin Malek*

Abstract

The Russian Armed Forces not only expelled invading Georgian troops from the separatist region South Ossetia, but they also entered Abkhazia and marched deep into Georgia proper over the course of the “five day war” in August 2008. The following report analyses Russia’s military preparations since spring 2008, an aspect hitherto almost unknown among politicians, the media and the public in Western Europe and North America. They included the shooting down of a Georgian drone by Russian fighter jets over Abkhazia, a massive increase of Russian “peacekeeping troops” along the Georgian-Abkhaz armistice line, the deployment of Russian railway troops to Abkhazia and the “Kavkaz 2008” military exercises. These developments occurred against the backdrop of political events, such as demands made by the Russian State Duma to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, Russia’s decision to withdraw from the CIS economic embargo against Abkhazia and NATO’s refusal to offer membership to Georgia.

Keywords: *Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, preparations to war*

Introduction

At midnight on August 7-8, 2008 Georgian armed forces advanced to Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. Georgia’s leadership therefore revealed its intention to forcefully reintegrate South Ossetia which since the beginning of the 1990s had not been under the control of the government in Tbilisi. The Russian Armed Forces immediately launched a military operation in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and other parts of Georgia, which was aimed at more than just securing the position of the separatists and damaging Georgian military potential. Numerous statements from senior officials in politics and the military, as well as in media coverage, left no doubt that Russia sought to prevent Georgia’s restoration of its territorial integrity, humiliate President Mikheil Saakashvili, intimidate the entire Georgian nation and damage Georgia’s economy and civilian infrastructure, thereby undermining its relevance as a gas and oil transit country. Furthermore, Russia intended to send a strong signal to the US, NATO and the EU with the subtext not to “meddle in” regions belonging to the former Soviet Union, because Moscow officially considers them as “zone of vital interests”.

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The August 2008 crisis in South Ossetia took many policymakers and journalists from Western Europe and North America by surprise. Obviously, many heard about this desolate and barely populated area for the first time. In many cases, speculations, assumptions and prejudices replaced well-substantiated information regarding the background of the crisis. Many politicians, media outlets and “experts” asked the question “who started the war” – Russia or Georgia? Influential voices from Western Europe and North America blamed both sides equally for escalating the conflict and committing war crimes, whilst others made “Saakashvili and his supporters in Washington” responsible for the war.

At the same time, Russia’s military preparation over the last few months did not receive much attention. The debate appears even more astonishing, considering the fact that clearly Russia launched a military incursion into Georgian territory, not vice versa.

Russian Preparations

On March 6, 2008 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced its decision to unilaterally withdraw from the economic sanctions imposed by the presidents of the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) against Abkhazia in 1996. However, this was merely a symbolic action, since Moscow had never implemented these sanctions. Abkhazia, in fact, was already economically tied to Russia: its currency is the Russian Rouble, not the Georgian Lari. On March 11, 2008 *Kommersant*, Russia’s prominent daily newspaper not controlled by the Kremlin, said that “the gradual recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is being prepared in Moscow”.¹ Ten days later the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, overwhelmingly passed a resolution which, referring to Kosovo and its secession from Serbia, asked the President and the Government to “investigate the usefulness of the recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia”.²

NATO, under pressure from Germany and France, denied Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP) during its summit in Bucharest at the beginning of April 2008. By this, the Kremlin, according to the Russian journalist Yulia Latynina, “understood of having received a blank cheque”.³ On April 16 outgoing President Vladimir Putin advised the government to strengthen Russia’s relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the realms of trade, social policy, science, culture and information policy. Even though both separatist regions, according to international law, are de jure part of Georgia, they were elevated to almost the same status held by Russia’s own regions. *Kommersant* commented that Putin aims to annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁴ In its statement the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

¹ Olga Allenova, “Russia Armed with Rebel Republics. For the NATO summit next month,” *Kommersant Online*, March 11, 2008, http://www.kommersant.com/p865374/NATO_breakaway_republics/ (accessed April 14, 2009).

² Zayavlenie Gosudarstvennoy Dumy No.245-5GD – O politike Rossiyskoy Federacii v otnoshenii Abkhazii, Yuzhnoy Osetii i Pridnestrovya [Declaration of the State Duma No. 245-5GD – About the policy of the Russian Federation vis-à-vis Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the Dnestr region], May 21, 2008, http://www.pnp.ru/chapters/rights/rights_6094.html (accessed April 14, 2009).

³ Juliya Latynina, “‘Samoe vazhnoe – byla li kolonna tankov?’ Kak nachinalas rossiysko-gruzinskaya voyna” [‘The most important thing – was there a column of tanks?’ How the Russian-Georgian War Started], *Novaya gazeta*, no. 36, September 2, 2008, 8.

⁴ Vladimir Solovyov, “Priznatelnye prikazaniya. Vladimir Putin nametil kurs na integratsiyu Abkhazii i Yuzhnoy Osetii v sostav Rossii.” [Thankful Orders. Vladimir Putin Outlines a Track to the Integration of

showed no concern at all about Georgia's rights and anxieties and justified Putin's actions on the grounds of "protecting the interests of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian population and its Russian citizens".⁵

On April 20 a Russian MiG-29 jet fighter shot down an unarmed Georgian drone over Abkhazia.⁶ The apparent aim of this operation was to prevent the observation of Russia's military preparations on the territory of Abkhazia. Only a few days later, Moscow increased the number of "CIS peacekeepers" in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone from 2,000 to 3,000 – without permission from Tbilisi, which subsequently protested but without any success. The "peacekeepers" had been stationed in Abkhazia since 1994, though without any UN mandate, and were comprised exclusively of Russian troops. In fact, they had always acted as "border troops" of "independent Abkhazia". On May 31 Russia, again without Tbilisi's consent, sent railway troops into Abkhazia. Officially, the 400 soldiers were on a "humanitarian mission". But much of the repaired infrastructure was subsequently used by 10,000 Russian soldiers during its invasion in western Georgia in August.

In mid-July 2008 the Russian Armed Forces launched the military exercise "Kavkaz-2008" near the Georgian border. According to Russian media reports, 8,000 soldiers, 30 fixed-wing aircrafts and helicopters and 700 vehicles rehearsed "scenarios of a military operation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia"⁷ The main force involved was the 58th Army which also played a key role during the Russian invasion into Georgia. "Kavkaz-2008" officially ended on August 2, only a few days before the outbreak of the war; yet the 58th Army remained on high alert.⁸ At the same time, the Railway Troops completed their work in Abkhazia.

Since August 2, pro-Russian South Ossetian separatist forces had been shelling several ethnic Georgian villages inside South Ossetia. On August 5 a tripartite monitoring group, which included Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observers and representatives of Russian peacekeeping forces in the region, issued a report. This document, signed by the commander of the Russian "peacekeepers" in the region General Marat Kulakhmetov, stated that there was evidence of attacks against several ethnic Georgian villages. It also claimed that South Ossetian separatists were using heavy weapons against the Georgian villages, which was prohibited by a 1992 ceasefire agreement.⁹

Abkhazia and South Ossetia], *Kommersant*, April 17, 2008, <http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=883332> (accessed April 13, 2009).

⁵ Civil Georgia, "Russian Foreign Ministry's Statement on Putin's Instruction to Boost Ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia," Civil Georgia, April 16, 2008, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17593> (accessed April 30, 2009).

⁶ The MiG-29 took off from the Gudauta military base in Abkhazia which, according to repeated Russian claims, was "closed" several years ago.

⁷ Aleksandr Gabuev, Georgij Dvali, "Moskva i Tbilisi obmenyalis ucheniyami" [Moscow and Tbilisi Trade Exercises], *Kommersant*, July 17, 2008, 6.

⁸ Margarete Klein, "Militärische Implikationen des Georgienkrieges. Zustand und Reformbedarf der russischen Streitkräfte" [Military Implications of the War in Georgia. State and Need For Reforms in the Russian Armed Forces]. *SWP-Aktuell*, 74, October 2008, 2.

⁹ Eka Tsamalashvili, Brian Whitmore, "Eyewitness Accounts Confirm Shelling Of Georgian Villages." *RFE/RL*, November 14, 2008, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1349256.html> (accessed April 14, 2009).

On August 6 a pro-Kremlin Russian daily newspaper came out with the headline: “Don Cossacks prepare to fight in South Ossetia”.¹⁰ And the next day, state-run (and de facto Kremlin-controlled) television channel *Rossiya* showed Abkhaz separatist leader Sergei Bagapsh stating at a meeting of the Abkhaz National Security Council: “I have spoken to the President of South Ossetia. It [situation] has more or less stabilized now. A battalion from the North Caucasus District has entered the area.”¹¹

According to official Russian statements, its Armed Forces merely launched “counter-attacks” to “protect Russian citizens in South Ossetia” on August 8. This, however, was challenged by reports in the Russian newspaper *Permskie novosti* on August 15: it interviewed soldiers from the 58th Army who served in Georgia but were allowed to leave the war zone on August 10 at the request of their parents. The newspaper quotes a young soldier saying, “we have been [in South Ossetia] since August 7. [...] Today we went from Tskhinvali to Vladikavkaz¹² to pick up weapons”. The article “Life will go on” in *Krasnaya zvezda* (*Red Star*), the newspaper of the Russian Ministry of Defence, was particularly traitorous. It cited Captain Denis Sidristy (who was decorated with the Russian Defense Ministry’s order of bravery for his performance in the war against Georgia) saying that “we were training near the capital of South Ossetia. [...] On August 7 we received the order to advance on Tskhinvali. [...] We arrived, cantoned, and on August 8 the place was on fire and many lost their heads.”¹³ Evidently, Sidristy witnessed the Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali on the night of August 8, which could happen only from the Southern side of the Caucasian mountains i.e. already on the territory of Georgia. As a result of the increased interest in this article, the editorial staff of *Krasnaya zvezda* removed it from its website,¹⁴ and it did not reappear again.¹⁵ Sidristy later had to deny his comments in *Krasnaya zvezda* by claiming that his unit left for Tskhinvali “a little bit later” than originally alleged.¹⁶

Long-term Pre-planning

Even observers unfamiliar with military affairs should comprehend that not even the most effective military organisation is able to mobilise 25,000 soldiers, 1,200 tanks and dozens of aircrafts, and deploy them in a mountainous region literally within a few hours. This consideration leads one to the conclusion that Russia’s military operation against Georgia had been carefully planned in advance. Modest Kolerov, former head of the Department for

¹⁰ Mariya Bondarenko, Ivan Sas, “Shashki nagolo. Donskie kazaki gotovyatsya voevat v Yuzhnoy Osetii” [Draw the Sword. The Don Cossacks Are Ready to Fight in South Ossetia], *Nezavizimaya gazeta*, August 8, 2008, http://www.ng.ru/regions/2008-08-06/1_kazaki.html (accessed April 13, 2009).

¹¹ As quoted in: Nikolaus von Twickel, “Moscow Claims Media War Win,” *The Moscow Times Online*, November 17, 2008, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/600/42/372391.htm> (accessed November 17, 2008).

¹² The capital of the Russian autonomous republic North Ossetia (Alania).

¹³ “Soldaty govoryat, chto pribyli v Yuzhnuyu Osetiyu eshche 7 avgusta” [The Soldiers Say That They Arrived in South Ossetia already on August 7], *Polit.ru*, September 10, 2008, <http://www.polit.ru/news/2008/09/10/seven.html> (accessed 14 April, 2009).

¹⁴ “S sayta ‘Krasnoy zvezdy’ udaleno intervyyu kapitana Sidristogo o vtorzhenii rossiyskikh voysk v YuO do napadeniya Gruzii” [The Interview With Captain Sidristy About the Intrusion of Russian Troops into South Ossetia before the Georgian Attack was removed from the Site of *Krasnaya zvezda*], *NEWSru.com*, September 15, 2008, http://www.newsru.com/russia/15sep2008/udaleno_print.html (accessed April 14, 2009).

¹⁵ Cf. *Krasnaya zvezda*, September 11, 2008, http://www.redstar.ru/2008/09/11_09/index.shtml (accessed April 13, 2009).

¹⁶ Ralf Beste et al., “Wetlauf zum Tunnel” [The Footrace to the Tunnel], *Der Spiegel*, no. 38, 2008, p. 132.

inter-regional and cultural ties with foreign countries of the President's Office in Moscow, admitted to a respectable Russian newspaper that "the Kremlin had a clear plan of actions in the case of a conflict. The expediency with which the military operation was executed confirms that".¹⁷ Andrei Illarionov, former economic advisor to Putin and now one of his most outspoken opponents, took the same line. According to him, the Russian invasion of Georgia "had been long prepared and successfully executed".¹⁸ Even in Western Europe, where most of the politicians were very careful "not to alienate Russia," this point did not go totally unnoticed. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said in an interview with a Moscow-based newspaper that "you [Russia] without question were prepared. [...] Russian troops, by some miracle, turned up on the border at the right time".¹⁹

Finally, Putin, Prime Minister since May 2008 and still Russia's "strongman," "flubbed" when he told his audience at the Valdai Discussion Club in September 2008 about his meeting with Chinese officials on the day of the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing. In these talks, Putin "recognised China's problem with Taiwan and therefore did not press China to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia".²⁰ Hence, Putin admitted that he considered the possibility of "recognising the independence" of Georgia's separatist regions, at the latest, on the day of the beginning of fighting in South Ossetia and possibly already decided on it. On August 26 it was announced by President Dmitri Medvedev.

According to Moscow-based security analyst Pavel Felgenhauer, Russia

*"...declared that it was forced to go to battle by the initial Georgian attack in South Ossetia. But there is sufficient evidence that this massive invasion was pre-planned beforehand for August [2008]. The swiftness with which large Russian contingents were moved into Georgia, the rapid deployment of a Black Sea naval task force, the fact that large contingents of troops were sent to Abkhazia where there was no Georgian attack all seem to indicate a rigidly prepared battle plan. This war was not an improvised reaction to a sudden Georgian military offensive in South Ossetia, since masses of troops cannot be held for long in 24-hour battle readiness. The invasion was inevitable, no matter what the Georgians did."*²¹

¹⁷ Ivan Preobrazhensky, "Est li u nikh plan?" [Do They Have a Plan?], *Vedomosti*, August 13, 2008, <http://www.pankisi.info/media/?page=ru&id=13503> (accessed April 14, 2009).

¹⁸ As quoted in: Brian Whitmore, "Did Russia Plan Its War In Georgia?" *RFE/RL*, August 15, 2008, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1191460.html> (accessed April 13, 2009).

¹⁹ Michail Tsygar, "Bernar Kushner: ya, naverno, menee diplomatichnyy i bolee chestnyy" [Bernard Kouchner: I am, probably, less diplomatic and more honest], *Kommersant Online*, October 10, 2008, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1048686> (accessed October 30, 2008).

²⁰ As quoted in: Andrei Kolesnikov, "Tak davayte zhe dogovarivatsya. Vladimir Putin prodemonstriroval voinstvuyushchiy patsifism" ['So, Let's Negotiate for It! Vladimir Putin demonstrated belligerent pacifism], *Kommersant Online*, September 12, 2009, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1024665> (accessed April 14, 2009).

²¹ Pavel Felgenhauer, "The Russian-Georgian War Was Preplanned In Moscow," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation), August 14, 2008, vol. 5:156, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=33888&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=166&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=33888&tx_ttnews[backPid]=166&no_cache=1) (accessed April 30, 2009).

Conclusion

Saakashvili is seen in Western Europe as “pro-American,” and mainly due to America’s – and not only former President George W. Bush’s – unpopularity this has become a liability not only for him but for all of Georgia. It is therefore, from a subjective point of view, traceable that many European and North American media outlets (such as the German weekly *Der Spiegel*) argued that Georgia was responsible for the outbreak of the “five day war”. However, they put the focus on the question of which state moved troops into South Ossetia first, thereby ignoring Russia’s military preparations since the beginning of 2008 as well as the pivotal question: who deployed troops on whose territory? And it is incontestable that Russia intervened on Georgian soil (and not vice versa), which, according to international law, constitutes an aggression. Little attention was paid to Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as “independent states” in the West, albeit this amounted to a forceful alteration of Georgia’s borders.

Responses from governments in Western Europe and North America indicated that the relations with Russia are considered too important as to risk a worsening relationship over “tiny and insignificant” Georgia. One often hears the argument in Western policymaking circles and the media that Russia “should not be isolated” because without it, “international problems cannot be solved.” The same voices, however, cannot name even a single example of an international problem which has been jointly solved by Russia and the West. Especially in the South Caucasian separatist conflicts, Russia for two decades has been a huge part of the problems – and not of the solutions. In most Western capitals – and not only in Berlin which pursues a policy of “rapprochement through entwinement” (“*Annäherung durch Verflechtung*” in German) with Russia – policymakers obstinately ignore this fact.