

WORST CASE: ESCALATION OF THE UNRESOLVED CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA

1. Events unfolding

In the night of Thursday 7 to Friday 8 August 2008, heavy fighting started in and around Tskhinvali and other places in South Ossetia, one of the two breakaway regions claiming independence from Georgia. Events unfolded quickly, and in the worst manner possible. Accusing Georgia of attacking both Russian peacekeepers and citizens in South Ossetia, Moscow immediately launched counter strikes in South Ossetia.

On Sunday, Russian bomber jets started attacking targets in Georgia proper. The cities of Poti and Gori were hit, as well as the international airport in Tbilisi and suburbs of the Georgian capital. Very soon after the escalation in South Ossetia, Georgian police units that were deployed in the Upper Kodori Valley in summer 2006 in breach of the 1994 Moscow Agreement came under attack from Abkhaz forces and Russian fighter jets. According to its own information, at 5 a.m. on Sunday the Georgian government called for a ceasefire and delivered a note to the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi. The Russian side denied this information and the shelling of Georgian cities continued as a confused picture emerged from South Ossetia. While the Georgian government claimed to have withdrawn its troops, Russian sources reported continuing Georgian fire against Russian and South Ossetian troops in Tskhinvali and elsewhere. Information about casualties is similarly unclear. Figures published by South Ossetian and Russian sources since the beginning of the clashes range from 1,400 to far above 2,500 dead, thousands of wounded in South Ossetia and up to 30,000 refugees, mainly fleeing to North Ossetia in Russia. Georgian officials spoke of several hundred victims of the Russian air strikes on Georgian cities.

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Nicolas Sarkozy and Dmitry Medvedev

The international community had called upon all parties involved to immediately cease all violence from the very beginning of the escalation. A high-ranking delegation consisting of representatives of the EU, the US, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), arrived in Georgia on Sunday to mediate between the parties. The UN Security Council has held several meetings since the outbreak of violence, without, however, being able to reach a

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common position on the issue. The French Presidency of the European Union has stepped up its efforts to find a solution to the renewed conflict and has announced that it would gather EU meetings on several levels, including a snap summit, in the coming days. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner went to Tbilisi. Several Western leaders, including Nicolas Sarkozy, George Bush and others, have been in direct contact with Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. On Monday, the Georgian side signed a ceasefire deal proposed by Bernard Kouchner and other European diplomats. Upon the visit of President Sarkozy to Moscow on Monday, President Medvedev put an end to further military operations, although the decision seems to be dependent on Georgia signing a formal commitment not to use force against Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

their position vis-à-vis Russia and make them full-fledged interlocutors for negotiations with the Georgian side.

The latest events have destroyed at least for the near future this promising vision. With the air bombing of targets in Georgia, Russia has indeed become a party to the conflict(s). Developments on the ground have also demonstrated that it is impossible, at least for the time being, to deal with the conflicts separately. Therefore, we now clearly see four conflict parties involved: South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Georgia, and Russia.

a) Russia

In the past months, more precisely after Kosovo declared independence, Russia has left little undone to demonstrate its power in the region and to provoke the Georgian side to take imprudent steps. The presidential decree on the legalisation of relations with both regions on 16 April triggered a chain of events and developments that has culminated in a new humanitarian catastrophe at the doorstep of the European Union. The legalisation of political relations (though falling short of political recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia), the lifting of the economic sanctions against Abkhazia, and the increase of the number of Russian troops in both regions aimed to draw both South Ossetia and Abkhazia ever further into the Russian orbit.

But these measures have to be seen in a broader context as well. They are the main elements of the so-called asymmetric response Russia is giving to Kosovo's independence and Western support for it. Therefore, what is happening now in Georgia is partly linked to Russian's campaign to reposition itself as a global actor whom the international community will have difficulties to overrule in the future. At the same time the events are a demonstration of Russia's weakness and lack of broader strategic thinking on many aspects of its foreign policy. Moscow has remained very ambivalent about the recognition of breakaway regions in the CIS in general, and it remains ambivalent at the time of writing. There is no concept of how to deal with these regions in the future, and no serious thinking about their ultimate status and its implications for Russia and the CIS. Moscow focuses on Abkhazia and South Ossetia because particularly Abkhazia is politically and economically interesting, and because relations with Georgia have greatly deteriorated since its 2003 Rose Revolution – but again, there is no broader political thinking about an approach towards unresolved conflicts in the region. As a result of the use of force beyond South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia will cast dark shadows on Russia as a partner country in the eyes of other CIS states

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Mikhail Saakashvili and Bernard Kouchner

2. The parties to the conflict(s)

Until armed hostilities erupted again last Thursday there have been diverging positions as to who the parties were both to the Georgian–South Ossetian as well as the Georgian–Abkhazian conflicts. Georgia claimed that Russia was its main adversary in both conflicts since it manipulates the de facto authorities in Sukhum/i and Tskhinvali. Abkhaz and South Ossetians, along with Russia, rejected this view.

According to this other reading, both conflicts are between the two regions claiming independence and Tbilisi, while Russia, though supporting Abkhazia and South Ossetia politically and economically, has the position of an internationally legitimised mediator and peacekeeper. Western states and international organisations were cautious to take sides officially but tended to support the Georgian view more or less openly. However, in the past months as tensions were increasing particularly between Georgia and Abkhazia, voices could be heard inside the EU calling for an 'empowerment' of the Abkhazians so as to strengthen

and will increase their striving for distance and independence from Russia.

Therefore, this undeclared war will weaken Russia's position in the CIS in the future.

Moreover, the Russian leadership allowed the situation to spiral out of control at a moment that is crucial for its relations with the West. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev had just made his first steps in the international arena and given some signals that were well received in Europe, and partly in the US. The EU and Russia have launched post Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) negotiations at the beginning of July after a political deadlock that lasted for almost 2 years and after some Member States had insisted that unresolved conflicts should be included in the European Commission's negotiation mandate. Last but not least, the escalation unfolds in the run-up to the US presidential elections. This will force both presidential candidates to take a very critical position towards Russia and will certainly have serious impact on US-Russia relations after January 2009.

b) Georgia

Georgia has found itself under increasing Russian pressure before, and particularly after the Rose Revolution. Russia has been distributing Russian passports to people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the beginning of the decade. An economic embargo against Georgia was imposed by Russia in 2006. The measures that have been taken since April are merely the peak of a long-lasting destructive and provocative policy. But at the same time the Saakashvili leadership did not manage to find a constructive approach towards the unresolved conflicts on its own. President Saakashvili linked his political destiny extremely closely to the resolution of the conflicts – and to their resolution exclusively according to Georgian conditions. The Georgian government has used extremely nationalist rhetoric and repeatedly violated ceasefire agreements as regards both conflicts in the past years. Most unfortunately, the Georgian side did not make any use of the political key it was holding in its hand by seriously seeking dialogue with those political forces particularly in Abkhazia which are, for various reasons, sceptical about increasing Russian influence. Instead, Georgian policy focused exclusively on Russia as the main enemy, thereby completely ignoring political actors in the two regions and their potential as interlocutors. In a nutshell, Georgian policy in recent years has done a lot to push South Ossetia and Abkhazia ever further away and into Russia's orbit and has, paradoxically, played into Russian hands. The current escalation has only aggravated this situation.

c) South Ossetia and Abkhazia

The de facto authorities in Sukhum/i and Tskhinvali are weak and dependent on Russia in political, economic and security terms. Both regions have been politically and economically isolated for 15 years. Since the international community, partly due to pressure from the Georgian side, was not able to reach a consensus over easing this situation, for instance by issuing international travel documents and other measures, Russian 'support' very often seemed to be the only option for people in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. At the same time, particularly in Abkhazia, where there is a more pluralistic political life and a more active civil society than in South Ossetia, political actors have viewed growing Russian influence with concern and emphasised their interest in close relations with other international actors, notably the EU. As mentioned above, this potential has been completely ignored and dismissed by the Georgian side. It has been acknowledged and become subject to internal debate inside the EU only very recently, and thus far has not been sufficiently used. Given the escalation of violence, the opportunities for realising this potential are shrinking rapidly.

3. What to do?

A humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding at the border of the EU. Efforts to ease tensions and de-escalate the situation in Georgia in recent months have been ineffectual. In this very dangerous situation the EU should finally overcome its internal divides and act in unity so as to put an end to this crisis. The EU should:

- 1) commit sufficient emergency humanitarian assistance in conflict-affected zones, with separate packages for South Ossetia, North Ossetia, Abkhazia and Georgia.
- 2) put pressure on Russia and threaten to suspend post-PCA negotiations if hostilities in Georgia do not come to an end.
- 3) put pressure on Georgia and call for official political commitment that there will be no further military actions in South Ossetia and no second front in Kodori/ Abkhazia. Despite the current hostilities in Kodori that have been initiated by the Abkhaz/Russian side, the EU should urge Georgia to withdraw its armed units from Kodori in order to reinstall conditions set in the Moscow Agreement.
- 4) urge all parties to the conflict to immediately sign a detailed agreement on a ceasefire and the non-use of

force in the future. This agreement should not be put forward by the Russian side, but by a neutral peace broker, which could be the EU or the OSCE.

After the consolidation of the ceasefire the EU should:

5) increase its security presence in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is time now to seriously consider the internationalisation of peacekeeping efforts in the region, and the EU should be involved in this. This debate should not, however, be dominated by the Georgian side. South Ossetia and Abkhazia must be part of the picture. The EU should use its relations with Russia to seek an agreement with Russia to complement its role or, if possible, to undertake joint peacekeeping efforts. The EU role could range from political observation to police or military presence on the ground, preferably under the EU flag or inside OSCE or UN multilateral formats.

6) find ways to co-operate directly with Sukhum/i and Tskhinvali. EU activities in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been channelled through European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) co-operation with Georgia and were therefore politically unacceptable for Sukhum/i and Tskhinvali. The EU has to find ways to deal with both regions in order to help them to break through their isolation and one-sided dependence on Russia. This implies neither political recognition nor an end of Russian engagement but rather a more neutral role for the EU, which could be accepted more easily by Sukhum/i and Tskhinvali. The EU has great potential to support economic reconstruction in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as to strengthen and involve civil society in this kind of co-operation. Multilateral programmes for economic reconstruction following the model of the OSCE-led Economic Rehabilitation Programme (ERP) in South Ossetia are a viable option. Resources for economic reconstruction, infra-

structure development and the like could be allocated in other programmes, such as Black Sea Synergy or Euroregions. It seems to be primarily a question of finding the political will and consensus within the EU for such a policy and for urging the Georgian side to accept it.

7) in the event of increasing pressure from Russia for regime change in Tbilisi and/or proposals of criminal prosecution of the Georgian government, offer political support to the current leadership in Georgia and make it clear to Russia that this kind of pressure is unacceptable to the EU.

Given the horrifying events we have witnessed in Georgia and South Ossetia in the past days, these recommendations aim first of all at consolidating the end of armed hostilities, the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia, and the immediate stabilisation of the security situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

It is difficult to foresee how this outbreak of violence will ultimately influence future negotiation and Georgia's chances to restore territorial integrity. In the longer run, the EU together with other international actors should do everything to bring all parties back to the negotiation table. Its actions must firmly demonstrate to Russia that the disproportionate use of force against Georgia is a violation of international law and absolutely unacceptable, and that it will have serious consequences for EU-Russia relations. The EU must, equally firmly, make it clear to Georgia that it does not accept violence as a legitimate instrument for restoring territorial integrity. Finally, the EU should become involved as a negotiator in the conflict-resolution processes. The current escalation has shown the inefficiency of existing formats. The EU has the strong potential to influence developments in the region in a positive way. It should make use of it.