

# Chapter 1

## Historical Background and International Environment

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## **1. Relations between Georgia and Russia**

The historical and political preconditions of the armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 reveal two sets of historically complex relations which overlap – bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia on the one hand, and internal conflictual relations between Georgia and the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the other. This context is furthermore entrenched in a broader geopolitical environment in which the Caucasus is presented as a theatre of competing influence between external powers.

### **History of an Ambivalent Relationship**

Georgian national identity claims historical origins dating as far back as the establishment of an autocephalous Georgian church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of the Georgian language with its own alphabet in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, for centuries Georgia was divided into diverse local sub-ethnic entities, each with its own characteristic traditions, manners, dialects and, in the case of the Mingrelians, Lazs and Svans, with separate languages similar to Georgian. The process of ethnic consolidation and nation-making had not been completed.<sup>1</sup> Earlier Georgian history culminated in the united Georgian Kingdom of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Georgia was a regional power in the Caucasus. In ensuing periods it split up into several political entities such as the kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti in the east and the kingdom of Imereti and principalities like Samegrelo and Svaneti in the west. Georgia weakened after repeated attacks by foreign powers like the Mongols and Timurides. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran began to subjugate western and eastern regions of Georgia respectively.

Seeking greater political influence in the Black Sea region, the Russian empire extended into the South Caucasus beginning in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The situation in Georgia was dramatic at that time. Turkish and Persian armed invasions destroyed the country. King Erekle II, who had succeeded in unifying two Georgian kingdoms in the eastern part of the country, solicited the Russian Empress Catherine II for protection. A treaty to this effect was signed in Georgievsk on 24 July 1783 and eastern Georgia (the kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti) became a Russian protectorate, notably against Persia. Yet Georgia fought alone against the next Persian invasion in 1795 and suffered the destruction of its capital. Erekle's son and successor, George XII, again asked Russia for protection while simultaneously trying

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<sup>1</sup> A standard work on this process is: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Bloomington/Indianapolis, 1994.

to reach a separate bilateral agreement with Persia. In response, Russia proclaimed the annexation of his kingdom: on 8 January 1801 Tsar Paul I signed a decree incorporating Georgia into the Russian Empire.

Tsarist rule over Georgia can be divided into three periods<sup>2</sup>: 1) in 1801-1844 Georgia was under Russian military administration (Georgian Guberniya); 2) in 1844-81 it was known as the Viceroyalty of the Caucasus, and 3) in 1881-1917 it was fully integrated into the Russian Empire and experienced intensified russification. During the Viceroyalty period, Tbilisi became the informal capital of the Caucasus and Georgian nobility was raised to equal status with its Russian counterpart. A Georgian intelligentsia, which emerged as of the 1870s, gave rise to a national awakening.

Historically, how do Russia and Georgia view this annexation? Russia describes it in terms of a “humanitarian mission”, helping an ancient Christian nation threatened by Islamic neighbours.<sup>3</sup> The Soviet and particularly the post-Soviet Russian view emphasise the unification of Georgian territories and stabilisation of the country under tsarist auspices. Georgian post-Soviet historiography partly underlines the negative consequences of the annexation, partly seeks a more balanced approach: the abolition of the autocephaly of the Georgian Church in 1811 and its subordination to the Russian Orthodox Church, denationalisation and russification were among the disadvantages. The advantages included Russian protection against external (Muslim) powers, the unification of all Georgian lands within one state organism and social progress such as the reform of the educational system. The advantages and disadvantages of the annexation were often interdependent: for instance, russification sparked a reactive Georgian national revival. To some extent, Georgians were a privileged nation within the Empire. Nevertheless, Russia is treated by the Georgian historical narrative mainly as a threat to the very existence of the Georgian nation.

Georgia’s independence as the *Democratic Republic of Georgia* (1918 - 1921) was due more to the collapse of the Russian Empire than to its own efforts of national liberation. Georgia considers this “first independence” as its first important experience of modern democratic statehood. At the time, Georgian politicians were not determined to break ties with Russia. Noe Zhordania, leader of Georgian Mensheviks and later Prime Minister, declared in late

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<sup>2</sup> For this periodisation see Andrzej Furier: *Droga Gruzji do niepodległości (Georgian Way to Independence)*, Poznań 2000, pp. 36-39; Wojciech Materski, *Gruzja (Georgia)*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> See the classical work of Vasily Klyuchevsky (Ključevkij, V.O.: *Russkaja istorija*, Rostov-na-Donu 2000, kniga tret’ja, 437-440).

November 1917 that Georgia had made a historic choice to join the West, a path that led through Russia. However, Bolshevik ideology was not popular in Georgia at that time. In 1918 - 1920 Bolshevik groups organised uprisings in the province of Shida Kartli, inhabited mainly by the Ossetian minority. The uprisings were brutally suppressed in 1920 by the Georgian army. The Ossetians believe their nation was the target of Georgian repression but the Georgians claim they were struggling against the Bolsheviks, not the Ossetians.

The Bolsheviks established a Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic on 25 February 1921, which a year later became part of a Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (TSFSR, also including the Soviet Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan). When this Transcaucasian entity was dissolved in December 1936, all three Republics were incorporated into the USSR. Soviet Georgia had a complicated territorial structure: the Autonomous Republics of Abkhazia and Adjara and the Autonomous District (Oblast') of South Ossetia were included within its borders, covering about 22 percent of its territory. The Georgian elite was convinced that these entities had been created by the Soviet (Russian) central power to limit Georgian jurisdiction over its own territory.

Opposition and resistance to Bolshevik policy in Georgia led to a national uprising in August 1924 that was cruelly suppressed by the Soviet authorities, targeting mainly the Orthodox clergy and national intelligentsia.<sup>4</sup> This mass terror, a “decapitation of the Georgian nation”, culminated in the 1930s. A Georgian national revival emerged in post-Stalinist decades. In April 1978, for example, thousands of people protested in Tbilisi against changes in the Georgian constitution which would give the Russian and Georgian languages equal status. Soviet authorities yielded to the demand to maintain the previous exclusive status of the Georgian language.

The Soviet period in Georgia ended tragically on 9 April 1989, the events of which became the “chosen trauma” of post-Soviet Georgian nationalism. Soviet troops broke up a peaceful demonstration in the centre of Tbilisi killing at least 19 people and wounding hundreds. The trauma resulted in a radicalisation of the Georgian national movement in the perestroika era, prompting even many Georgian communists to consider independence as the only viable perspective for the country.

Two years later, symbolically on 9 April 1991, the Georgian Parliament (Supreme Council) proclaimed independence. The most challenging heritage of the Soviet period – also in terms

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<sup>4</sup> Valery Silogava and Kakha Shengelia, *History of Georgia*, Tbilisi, 2007, pp. 228-229.

of Georgian-Russian relations – remained the country's territorial structure with its three autonomous entities (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Adjara). During the transition period to post-Soviet sovereignty under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the national movement did much to alienate these regions and national minorities from the Georgian independence project, branding ethnocentrist slogans such as “Georgia for Georgians”.

Following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia declared former Soviet territory as its sphere of vital interest.<sup>5</sup> Expecting international recognition of its position as a guarantor of peace and stability in this area, Russia defined the post-Soviet newly independent states as its “near abroad”, stressing their proximity and close ties with Russia. It was probably important for Russia to have influence in the South Caucasus to maintain control over a region neighbouring Iran and Turkey and its own North Caucasus, in which centrifugal tendencies were on the rise.

Relations between Moscow and Tbilisi were tense in 1990 - 1993, during the mandate of first Georgian President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the initial period of Eduard Shevardnadze's rule. They then improved significantly until the late 1990s following Georgian accession to the CIS in 1993 but deteriorated once again in the early 2000s. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, soon criticised for his authoritarian rule, represented strong anti-Russian sentiments that were widely shared by the Georgian elite.

In October 1993, after Georgia's unsuccessful military engagement in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Eduard Shevardnadze asked Moscow for assistance to suppress an insurrection instigated by supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the western province of Samegrelo. Russian troops provided this assistance but at the price of a re-orientation of Georgia's foreign policy. Eduard Shevardnadze signed the decree on Georgia's accession to the CIS in October 1993. In 1994 Georgia also joined the Russian-controlled Collective Security Treaty. Four Russian military bases, present since Soviet times, were to be maintained on Georgian territory, and Russian border troops deployed along the Georgian border with Turkey and at the sea border. The Russian military presence in Georgia also included the Russian-staffed peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

With the location of foreign military bases on its territory, Georgia not only lost its territorial integrity *de facto*, but partially also its sovereignty. Georgian disenchantment with Russia

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<sup>5</sup> Principles and Directions of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, adopted at the beginning of 1993, and ensuing documents.

coincided with the West's growing interest in the South Caucasus since the mid 1990s and the rising significance of the Caucasian-Caspian region for the independent supply of oil and gas to the global market. Georgia supported important projects promoted by Washington as well as EU-fostered transport projects. Russia perceived such projects as an attempt to undermine its own geoeconomic position in the wider Caspian region. In the late 1990s, Georgia began to tighten its relations with the West. In 1999 it joined the Council of Europe, intensified its relations with NATO and left the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty. Relations between Moscow and Tbilisi continued to deteriorate, worsening with Russia's second war in Chechnya beginning in late 1999 and the Georgian refusal to allow Russian troops access along the Chechen segment of the Russian-Georgian border.

Since the late 1990s, the Georgian authorities had made new efforts to reduce the Russian military presence in the country. In 1993, Georgia and Russia signed an agreement on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia until 1995, but the agreement did not come into force. In ensuing years, bilateral agreements on the deployment of Russian military bases were signed, the most important one on 15 September 1995. Under this agreement, four Russian bases were deployed in Georgia: in Batumi (Adjara), in Gudauta (Abkhazia), in Akhalkalaki (region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, inhabited by Armenians), and in Vaziani (near Tbilisi). An agreement on the withdrawal of Russian border troops was signed in November 1998 and all Russian border troops left Georgia in 1999. During the Istanbul OSCE Summit in 1999, Russia had committed to dismantling its military bases in Georgia. In 2001 the base in Vaziani was withdrawn and the infrastructure of the base in Gudauta was transferred to the CIS (in fact Russian) Peacekeeping Force in Abkhazia. The dismantling of the two other bases was the subject of difficult negotiations but was eventually implemented in 2007.

Russia, or at least certain forces proceeding from the territory of the Russian Federation (primarily the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus), had intervened in Georgia's conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the beginning of the 1990s. The military victory of pro-Abkhaz fighters in their armed conflict with Georgian troops would not have been possible without this interference. But in the early 1990s this Russian involvement had an inconsistent character. The political crisis in Russia itself influenced its policy in the region. Local Russian commanders stationed in Abkhazia actively supported the Abkhaz side. Divisions within the Russian Government may explain why both Georgia and the secessionist forces had been receiving Russian support intermittently.

The ensuing peace processes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were largely in the hands of Russia. For around 15 years it was possible to preserve a minimum of stability in the region, i.e. to keep larger military operations suspended. The conflicts were in effect frozen.

At the turn of the millenium it became increasingly apparent that the resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was not in the offing. Major geopolitical changes occurred in the first years of the new millennium in connection with the reorientation of America's foreign policy after 9/11 (2001) and EU enlargement, leading to a new policy towards its new neighbours. These changes further included NATO's eastward enlargement. Under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia became wealthier, more stable and more assertive of its claims to influence in its "near abroad". Increasingly, Russia saw the West as a rival in the South Caucasus and elsewhere. This new international environment proved not to be favourable to the resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the periods mentioned above, both Russia and Georgia developed an "enemy image" and negative stereotypes of each other.

### **Growing Confrontation 2004 – 2008**

Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Mikheil Saakashvili, bilateral relations became the most precarious ever between the Russian Federation and a neighbouring state formerly belonging to the USSR. There were many irritants between Moscow and Tbilisi already in the period of President Shevardnadze. Problems poisoning the bilateral relations included: the Georgian demand for a Russian troop withdrawal and the dismantling of military bases on Georgian territory in accordance with commitments made by Russia at the Istanbul OSCE Summit in 1999; Georgian participation in the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC); Russian demands for military access to Georgian territory to fight armed Chechen rebels in uncontrolled areas like the Pankisi Gorge; and increased US military support for the modernisation of a hitherto paltry Georgian army.

In January 2004, Andrei Kokoshin, Chairman of the Russian Duma Committee on CIS Affairs, referred to Georgia's "over-reliance on Western countries in the solution of these issues" as "the previous Georgian leadership's great mistake".<sup>6</sup> The main reason for the Russian frustration with Georgia was the "westernisation" of its foreign and security policies, which was to become even more pronounced under the new Georgian leadership of President Saakashvili. Russian diplomacy formally affirmed the sovereignty and territorial integrity of

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<sup>6</sup> NTV television, 8 January, 2004.

Soviet successor states, yet still perceived these states as Russia's "near abroad", and in this perception, the sovereignty of the foreign and security policy of the newly independent states was limited. Russia's response to this "westernisation" was a coercive Georgia policy, a number of economic and diplomatic punitive measures.

In this context, Georgia's unresolved conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia were a crucial matter. For the Georgians, the territorial integrity of their country and the reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were a matter of unquestionable national consensus. Even though Eduard Shevardnadze had tried to keep the profile of the unresolved secessionist conflicts low, he was not ready to give up Abkhazia or South Ossetia. And when his successor Mikheil Saakashvili was later criticised by various Georgian parties for his authoritarian tendency, there still remained a strong consensus among all these parties on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. "All of these parties completely supported the president's approach toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia."<sup>7</sup> On the Russian side, there was a similar consensus that the majority of non-Georgian residents of both territories - with their anti-Georgian and pro-Russian mood and with Russian passports distributed to them by the Kremlin on a massive scale - were to be protected as "Russian citizens" against possible "Georgian aggressions".

The Russian-Georgian breach in this regard was so deep that according to an assessment in 2007 by Sergei Markedonov, Head of the Department for Interethnic Studies at the Moscow Institute of Political and Military Analysis, any improvement in bilateral relations could only be expected in areas that were not directly related to the South Ossetia or Abkhazia issues.<sup>8</sup> However, such neutral areas were shrinking as President Saakashvili declared the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity to be his political priority. He practised a policy of accelerated, enhanced reintegration whereas Russia increased its support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia was engaged in these conflicts as the main peacekeeper, as facilitator and as a member of the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary-General, but it was demonstrating a clear bias in favour of the "separatist" parties to the conflict. Its policy toward Georgia was perceived in Tbilisi as "not peacekeeping, but keeping in pieces".

Besides its main peacekeeping role in Georgia's unresolved conflicts, Russia had at its disposal strong economic resources permitting a coercive Georgia policy. Georgia had no

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<sup>7</sup> Sergei Markedonov: *The Paradoxes of Russia's Georgia Policy*, in: *Russia in Global Affairs*, April-June 2007, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



equivalent means for an adequate response with the exception, perhaps, of its veto power on Russia's admission to the World Trade Organisation.

Shortly after the peaceful power change in Tbilisi, the then acting interim President Nino Burjanadze visited Moscow in December 2003, making it clear that the main purpose of her visit was to normalise Russian-Georgian relations. In the Russian point of view, the main pre-conditions for "normalization" of relations with Georgia were the following:<sup>9</sup>

- Renunciation of a unilateral orientation toward the US and NATO;
- Acknowledgement of Russia's special interest in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, home to tens of thousands of people who had recently obtained Russian passports;
- Permission for Russian security forces to fight Chechen rebels from Georgian territory, mainly in the Pankisi Gorge.

The main argument for persuading the new Georgian authorities to accept these conditions was economic. Georgia owed Russia more than USD 300 million, mainly for electricity.<sup>10</sup> Other forms of leverage at that time were the high number of Georgian migrant workers in Russia, and Georgia's dependency on Russia for trade and energy supply.

Hence, bilateral relations between Moscow and Tbilisi were already burdened when President Saakashvili came to power in January 2004. Except for a short "intermezzo", these relations further deteriorated in ensuing years.

### **A Short Period of Calm**

A common presentation of bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia holds that they soured soon after President Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in the "Rose Revolution", with promises of even closer ties to the United States and the European Union, and an enhanced drive to join NATO. However, between the power change in Tbilisi in November 2003 and an escalation around South Ossetia in summer of 2004, an "intermezzo" seemed to signal a change for the better. One of the starting points for this improvement was the mediation role of Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov in the Georgian political crisis of November 2003, which ended with the resignation of President Shevardnadze. During the period of presidential and parliamentary elections that followed in Georgia (in January and

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<sup>9</sup> *Vladimir Putin sorts out Russian-Georgian relations*, Kommersant, December 26, 2003, p.9 (The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, No.51, vol.55, January 21, 2004, p.20)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

March 2004 respectively), the new power elite around Mikheil Saakashvili gained the overwhelming consent of the population. This clear victory helped to pave the way for a strategy to overcome the weak state syndrome that had characterised the final years of the Shevardnadze era.

For Russia, it was a period of sizing up the new leadership in Tbilisi. One opportunity to do so was Mikheil Saakashvili's first visit to Moscow as the new Georgian President in February 2004. He announced Georgian willingness to take Russian interests into account and mentioned the improvement of their bilateral relations as one of his three main objectives – the other two being the fight against corruption and the reorganisation and strengthening of the Government.

Confronted with new President Saakashvili's authority at home the Kremlin adopted a more accommodating attitude towards Tbilisi.<sup>11</sup> A short thaw in bilateral relations included discussions on restructuring the Georgian energy debt owed to Russia, the unsettled conflict on Abkhazia with both sides wanting to go back to the "Sochi process",<sup>12</sup> agreements on media and information exchanges, the creation of a bilateral trade commission and closer cooperation in the energy sphere. A new bilateral agreement on 3 April 2004 provided for Georgian-Russian cooperation in the security sphere. The Georgian Defence Minister and his Russian counterpart announced bilateral solidarity efforts in combating international terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal migration and weapons smuggling.

Some Russian analysts considered the power change in Tbilisi as an occasion to re-think the Russian policy in the Caucasus. Sergei Karaganov, Chairman of the influential Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, suggested that Russia's confrontational stance toward Georgia only masked the absence of a well-considered approach.<sup>13</sup> Another commentator called into question Russia's policy of keeping regional conflicts in a status of "controllable instability" for the purposes of its own power projection in the South Caucasus. His argument: Russian power elites had no skill in controlling unstable systems.<sup>14</sup> Liberal-minded experts urged a Moscow policy shift toward Tbilisi, arguing that a continued hard-line approach would only

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<sup>11</sup> Igor Tobarkov: Saakashvili's political punch prompts Kremlin to rethink policies, in: Eurasia Insight, April 7 2004.

<sup>12</sup> The "Sochi process" agreed to talks between Georgia, Russia, and Abkhazia on confidence-building measures, on the return of Georgian IDPs/refugees to Abkhazia, the reinstatement of war-destroyed infrastructure, and energy supplies to Abkhazia.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Igor Tobarkov, Russian Policy Makers Struggle to Respond to Political Changes in Georgia, Eurasia Insight, January 11, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Vladislav Inozemcev in Nezavisimaja Gazeta, August 17, 2004.

drive Georgia deeper into the arms of its Western partners. Traditionalists in Russian policy-making and policy-analysing circles argued the opposite and were highly sceptical about the intentions of the ruling triumvirate in Georgia, the new power elite in Tbilisi represented by Mikheil Saakashvili, Nino Burdjanadze and Zurab Zhvania. Konstantin Zatulin, Director of the Institute for CIS Studies in Moscow, was convinced that the Georgian administration wanted “to finally take Georgia out of Russia’s sphere of influence and turn it into a reliable US ally”.<sup>15</sup> Dmitri Trenin from the Carnegie Moscow Centre referred to the bilateral relations at the end of 2003 as the “calm before the storm”.<sup>16</sup>

Most analysts assessed the Russian economic influence in Georgia to be one stable factor in the relationship.<sup>17</sup> Another was the affinity for strong, centralised presidential power, pruned by the leaders of both states. For a while, the rhetoric on both sides changed and a Russian-Georgian political dialogue gained fresh momentum. At the same time President Saakashvili presented Georgia as Washington’s “main geopolitical partner” and pressed his western partners for help in restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity. Although Russia allegedly had supported the peaceful outcome of the power change in Tbilisi, the Rose Revolution was perceived as a challenge to Russia’s new assertiveness in CIS space. It was the first of subsequent “colour revolutions”, which were described in Russian commentaries as a “geopolitical aggression” steered by Western powers against Russia’s strategic position in the post-Soviet space. The supposed initial political affinity between Presidents Putin and Saakashvili changed into the most problem-ridden personal relationship between state leaders in the CIS.

### **The Adjara Crisis in Spring 2004**

In this period, the disputed question of military bases merged with a political conflict around Adjara. The new Georgian leadership wanted to re-establish control over this territory. It counted on the support of the local population but was concerned about the risk of Russian intervention into this conflict. Russia’s potential leverage into this crisis was amplified by the fact that “up to 70 percent of the residents of the 12<sup>th</sup> Russian military base in Batumi are

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<sup>15</sup> Igor Tobarkov: Russian policy makers struggle to respond to political changes in Georgia, in: Eurasia Insight, January 11, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Civil Georgia, December 22, 2003, Q&A with Dmitri Trenin of Carnegie Moscow Center, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=5865&search=q&a%20with%20Dmitri%20Trenin>

<sup>17</sup> Russia’s First Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Valery Loshchinin, stated in February 2005: “Our economic relations with Georgia have grown deeper with the advent of the new leadership. Russia’s economic presence in Georgia is now weightier than ever before; our capital is entering all the major economic sectors.” Interview in Rustavi-2 TV, February 10, 2005.

locals, but all of them have Russian citizenship”.<sup>18</sup> Aslan Abashidze, the leader of Adjara, looked to Moscow for support in his political confrontation with the new power elite in Tbilisi. But in the confrontation between the new leadership in Tbilisi and the regime in Batumi, Moscow took a cautious stance between the Georgian Government and factions supporting Aslan Abashidze. At the height of the Adjara crisis in April and May 2004, when President Saakashvili gave Aslan Abashidze a 10-day ultimatum calling for his resignation and the disbanding of his militia forces, the Kremlin helped to resolve the conflict peacefully.

This crisis resulted in the reintegration of Adjara into the Georgian jurisdiction. The new Georgian Foreign Minister, Salome Zourabishvili, mentioned in talks with her Russian colleague that the resolution of the Adjara case was not transferable to Abkhazia. Other commentaries in Georgia, however, considered the outcome of this crisis as a precursor for a near-term reintegration of other breakaway territories.

The Adjara crisis had never been a secessionist or ethno-territorial conflict and was, indeed, incomparable to the Abkhazia or South Ossetia scenarios. The conflict between Tbilisi and Batumi lacked deeper historical and ethnic roots. There is no ethno-linguistic difference between Adjarians and Georgians. There is a religious difference with many Adjarians being Muslim, but this was never a factor in the conflict. There had never been an Adjarian declaration of secession from Georgia. And above all, Georgians and Adjarians had never known the wider armed clashes and the experience of mutual violence and brutality that constitute the crucial psychological element in Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian relations, and the source of ever-recurring stories of hatred and fear. A few weeks after the peaceful end of the Adjara crisis, an escalated South Ossetia crisis would demonstrate how very different the Adjara crisis was compared to Georgia’s secessionist conflicts. By then bilateral relations between Moscow and Tbilisi had become stormy.

### **The South Ossetia Crisis in Summer 2004**

At the beginning of his presidency, Mikheil Saakashvili promised that he would restore Georgia’s territorial integrity by the end of his tenure. Statements such as “South Ossetia will be reintegrated into Georgia within a year at the latest”<sup>19</sup> were alarming Moscow. Shortly after the reintegration of Adjara, the new government in Tbilisi began an anti-smuggling offensive in South Ossetia where a marketplace like Ergneti had indeed become a centre of

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<sup>18</sup> ITAR-TASS, 5 May 2004, 12:24 GMT.

<sup>19</sup> Saakashvili at a news briefing in Tbilisi at July 10, 2004, quoted in: Eurasia Insight, July 12, 2004 “Saakashvili: Russia to blame for South Ossetia Crisis”.

illegal trade in the Caucasus. Special forces from the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs were sent to some villages in South Ossetia, mainly under Georgian control.

In Russia, this security reinforcement was seen as an attempt to re-establish control over the whole of South Ossetia, and as the beginning of a new conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi. The Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs, Georgi Baramidze, reportedly announced that Tbilisi intended to resort to arms if Russian peacekeepers tried to shut down a police post that was blocking attempts to smuggle contraband from Russia to Georgia via South Ossetia.<sup>20</sup> The flow of contraband, indeed, decreased after police posts were opened in Georgian villages around Tskhinvali and not far from the Ergneti market. At the same time, Tbilisi offered South Ossetia a “carrot”. For the first time, President Saakashvili proposed that South Ossetian autonomy would be re-established. He also promised to pay Georgian pensions to residents of South Ossetia even if they had already received pensions from Moscow as bearers of Russian passports. According to Georgia’s Minister for Conflict Resolution, Georgi Khaindrava, Georgia was prepared to grant South Ossetia the same degree of autonomy that North Ossetia had as one of the republics within the Russian Federation.

A verbal skirmish between Moscow and Tbilisi ensued. Russian accusations of Georgian aggression were countered by Zurab Zhvania, Georgian Prime Minister: “On Georgian territory, no one can dictate to the Georgian authorities how they should restore order or put a stop to smuggling”.<sup>21</sup> Georgian authorities intended to use a strategy similar to the one that was successful in the Adjara crisis. They tried to drive a wedge between the separatist authorities and the local population of South Ossetia. But the Georgian approach to regain control over the region and the Russian support for the challenged regime of *de facto* President Eduard Kokoity of South Ossetia led to a confrontation that escalated into armed clashes in the mosaic of Georgian and Ossetian villages surrounding Tskhinvali. On 10 July 2004 the Georgian President called on his military to be ready to mount “protracted, full-scale operations” to defend the country’s territory. All available resources would be used for defence.<sup>22</sup> On the other side volunteers from the Russian North Caucasus and from the separatist Transnistria region in Moldova reportedly came to South Ossetia to help the Ossetians counter a “Georgian aggression”.

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Gennady Sysoyev and Vladimir Novikov in Kommersant, June 1, 2004, pp.1,9.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Gennady Sysoyev and Vladimir Novikov in Kommersant, June 3, 2004, p.9.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted by Svetlana Gamova in Novye Izvestija, July 12, 2004, p.4.

The conflict over South Ossetia became the central bone of contention between Russia and Georgia and took on international dimensions. Georgia pushed for internationalisation of the peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, seeking to end the Russian dominance of the existing format. In early August, President Saakashvili warned that vessels attempting to dock in Abkhazia without Georgian authorisation would be targeted, including tourist ships from Russia. The Georgian coast guard had already fired at a freighter reportedly registered in Turkey. Russian commentators linked the Georgian demands with US military support and Georgian NATO ambitions. But Washington and Brussels did not in any way condone the “reconquista-rhetoric” on the Georgian side.<sup>23</sup>

In August 2004 the crisis reached its high point with night-time shelling of Tskhinvali and nearby villages and escalating armed clashes. Georgia was on the verge of a large-scale armed conflict with its former autonomous region. Georgian Defence Minister Baramidze announced, “Georgia is prepared for war and does not advise anybody to start one”.<sup>24</sup> But the new Georgian Government knew that an armed conflict would derail all of its plans to rebuild the Georgian state and economy, and most of President Saakashvili’s main campaign promises. Russia was threatening to impose a total transportation blockade on Georgia. Abkhazia announced its withdrawal from all talks with Tbilisi as a result of the freighter incident.

In August 2004 an open war in South Ossetia involving Russian troops could be prevented. Georgian security forces stopped their offensive in the conflict zone. But the Georgian side now had a fundamental commitment problem when addressing new peace initiatives and autonomy offers to the South Ossetian and the Abkhaz conflict sides. The Georgian military initiative reactivated the memory of wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 1991 - 1992 and 1992 - 1994 respectively, raising the already high psychological barrier to confidence-building even higher. Furthermore, the crisis marked an important step in the further deterioration of bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia.

In the years thereafter, the Georgian Government continued to focus on South Ossetia as its primary object for its declared policy of reintegration and restoration of territorial integrity. In

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<sup>23</sup> The US coordinator of the Committee on Eastern Europe and Russia in NATO, Ira Straus, made rather critical comments stating that a peaceful reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is only possible with Moscow’s help. “Saakashvili is driving his democratic revolution to the edge of an abyss, as he pushes toward military methods of bringing South Ossetia and Abkhazia back under Georgian control”. Quoted by: The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, No. 32, vol.56, September 8, 2004, p.4.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Vladimir Novikov and Oleg Zorin, Kommersant, August 2, 2004, p.9. (The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, no.31, vol.56, September 1, 2004, p.6-7).

July 2005, President Saakashvili announced a new peace plan for South Ossetia that offered substantial autonomy and a three-stage settlement, consisting of demilitarization, economic rehabilitation, and a political settlement. South Ossetia's *de facto* President Kokoity rejected the plan, asserting in October 2005 "we are citizens of Russia".<sup>25</sup> In November 2006, a popular referendum was held in South Ossetia to reaffirm its "independence" from Georgia. Many South Ossetians voted in the 2007 Russian Duma election and the 2008 Russian presidential election.

For the purpose of reintegration, the Georgian strategy changed from using security forces in South Ossetia to building a political bridgehead in the breakaway region. "Presidential" elections in South Ossetia in November 2006 re-elected *de facto* President Kokoity. An alternative election held in parallel at the same time among the ethnic Georgian population (and those displaced from South Ossetia) elected Dimitri Sanakoyev, an Ossetian politician committed to political dialogue with Tbilisi and opposed to the power elite around Eduard Kokoity. In this population sector, a referendum was approved in support of Georgia's territorial integrity. In 2007 Tbilisi appointed Dimitri Sanakoyev head of a "provisional administration in South Ossetia" with official residence in the village of Kurta. A dual power structure had thus emerged in this tiny region with its 70,000 residents (of whom more than 20,000 ethnic Georgians). Tbilisi used the Sanakoyev administration in its plan to internationalise the negotiations on South Ossetia in a 2+2+2 format (Georgia, Russia, EU, OSCE, the Kokoity authorities, the Sanakoyev authorities) and was eager to present Dimitri Sanakoyev in international forums. At the same time Tbilisi launched a public campaign against Kokoity's separatist regime in Tskhinvali that was denounced as "criminal".

### **The Dispute over Russian Peacekeeping Role in Georgia's Conflict Zones**

Russia's peacekeeping role in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was a fundamental bone of contention in Georgian-Russian bilateral relations, and a focus of Georgia's diplomatic efforts. Georgia increasingly demanded a revision of the existing negotiation formats and the internationalisation of peacekeeping forces in the conflict zones. The existing formats were based on ceasefire agreements ending the 1991 - 1994 armed conflicts between Georgia and both regions.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> CEDR, October 7, 2005; Jim Nichol: Russia-Georgia Conflict in August 2008: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests, Congressional Research Service, March 3, 2009, p.3

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 2 "Conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia: Peace Efforts 1991 – 2008".

A paradox of the Russian peacekeeping role in Georgia was that Russia behaved with self-interest and ambitions of increased strategic influence in the South Caucasus, but at the local level, the Russian presence seemed to be indispensable and was presented as part of the former superpower's burden.<sup>27</sup> Prior to the growing confrontation between Moscow and Tbilisi and the new escalations in the conflict zones, Russian peacekeeping operations in South Ossetia were generally considered to be successful and effective in terms of stabilising the conflict and facilitating interactive negotiations between the Georgian and Ossetian sides.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, there was no substantial international pressure for a revision of these Russian-centred peacekeeping formats. Some Western commentaries acknowledged that the peacekeepers blocked the Georgian Government from initiating military actions for the reintegration of the breakaway territories.<sup>29</sup>

In the Georgian perception, however, the Russian peacekeepers had become border guards defending the administrative borders of Georgia's breakaway territories. In the 2004 South Ossetia crisis, the Georgian Parliament adopted a special statement. In the sternest accusation Tbilisi had made against Moscow since President Saakashvili took office, the parliamentarians declared: "The Russian Federation is not a peacekeeper or a mediator but one of the parties to the conflict".<sup>30</sup> In the framework of GUAM<sup>31</sup>, Georgia's demand for an internationalisation and revision of the existing peacekeeping formats was supported by Ukraine. Together with Tbilisi, Kiev preferred to see other players such as the European Union and NATO as mediators and providers of peacekeeping troops in post-Soviet secessionist conflicts.

In October 2005 the Georgian Parliament adopted another "Resolution on the Peacekeeping Operations and the Situation in Georgia's Conflict Zones". It included a list of Russian citizens holding "high-level positions in the separatist power structures". The Parliament

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<sup>27</sup> A typical Russian commentary on this aspect said in 2004, "Russia has no right to shirk its responsibilities as an intermediary and a peacekeeper. It must be made absolutely and unequivocally clear that Russia is resolved to prevent genocide in this region. This would seriously damage Moscow's prestige in the North Caucasus, in the region as a whole and in the CIS". See A. Chigorin: *The Georgian Test*, in: *International Affairs* No.5, 2004, pp.125-138; *Countdown to War in Georgia*, 2008, p. 497.

<sup>28</sup> John Mackinlay, Evgenii Sharov: *Russian peacekeeping operations in Georgia*, in: John Mackinlay, Peter Cross (Ed.): *Regional Peacekeepers. The Paradox of Russian Peacekeeping*, United Nations University Press Tokyo-New York-Paris 2003, pp. 64-111, p.72.

<sup>29</sup> Michael A. Weinstein: *Deadlock in Georgia. An Incremental Gain for Russia*, *Eurasia Insight*, August 17, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Vladimir Novikov and Gennady Sysoyev in *Kommersant*, August 14, 2004, p.1.

<sup>31</sup> In October 1997, Georgia together with Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova established a consultative forum known as GUAM.



again adopted a resolution in July 2006 on the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers and transformation of that operation. However, citing risks of destabilisation, Georgia's Western partners dissuaded Tbilisi from implementing that resolution. Speaking at the UN in September 2006 President Saakashvili accused Russia of the "annexation" and "bandit style occupation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In this unprecedented harsh speech he demanded that Moscow pull the Russian peacekeepers out of both territories. For the Russian side it was highly symbolic that this speech at the 61<sup>st</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly in New York came one day after the NATO Council, also meeting in New York, had decided to commence an intensified dialogue with Georgia.<sup>32</sup>

Georgian criticism of Russian peacekeeping in Abkhazia's security zone flared up again in October 2007 when a Russian unit allegedly attempted to take control of a Georgian "patriotic youth camp", situated within Georgian-controlled territory near the Georgian-Abkhaz demarcation line in Ganmukhuri. In response to this incident, the Georgian National Security Council authorised the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to redouble efforts toward internationalising the peacekeeping operation.

Georgia expected greater involvement in conflict resolution by its partners like NATO and the EU, and by regional and international organisations. This connection between the Euro-Atlantic orientation of Georgian foreign and security policy and the expectations of Western support for reintegration of the "breakaway territories" was also made by the broader Georgian public.<sup>33</sup> According to a poll in February 2007, Georgian respondents gave the following answers to the question: "What do you expect from NATO membership?": security guarantees 57%, restoration of territorial integrity 42%, social welfare 22%, strengthening democracy 16%.

Georgia's demand to internationalise the peacekeeping formats in Abkhazia and South Ossetia met with restraint in the West. International organisations and Georgia's Western partners conceded the peacekeeping and mediator role to Russia reasoning that Russia recognised Georgian sovereignty at least formally. It was only since March 2008 with the escalation of Russian-Georgian relations over the unresolved conflicts that they began to perceive Russia's role as being much closer to that of a party to the conflict. It became more and more untenable to argue that Russia was an impartial arbiter. This understanding,

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<sup>32</sup> The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, No.39, vol.58, October 25, 2006, p.1-3.

<sup>33</sup> IRI (International Republic Institute), USAID etc.: Georgian National Voter Study. February 2007.

however, was not translated into actions capable of effectively transforming the peacekeeping and negotiating formats into genuinely international ones. The EU's Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby, very cautiously answered that the EU would look into the possibilities given that the existing peacekeeping force does not seem to enjoy the trust of all the parties and has become a source of disagreements.<sup>34</sup> But Brussels largely respected the strong Russian reservation about any change in the existing formats for peacekeeping and mediation in the "frozen conflicts".<sup>35</sup>

The European Union's engagement in unresolved conflicts in its common neighbourhood with Russia was characterised by the International Crisis Group as "working around the conflict", i.e. not "working on the conflict".<sup>36</sup> It was a soft policy confining itself to measures of conflict transformation by means of confidence-building between the parties to the conflict, the support of the mediation efforts made by other actors (OSCE in South Ossetia and UN in Abkhazia), economic rehabilitation of war damaged conflict zones and support for economic projects uniting the parties to the conflict, such as the power station at the Inguri river. The EU was not involved in "hard" security issues, as the Russian Federation was not supportive of its more active engagement such as providing peacekeeping troops. It was only after the armed conflict of August 2008 that the EU became more actively engaged in stabilising the post-war situation via its unarmed civil Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM) within the framework of European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

### **"Creeping annexation"**

Georgia's objection to the dominant Russian role in the peacekeeping operation in its conflict zones was motivated mainly by the perception that Russia's contribution to conflict management in the South Caucasus was not "peacekeeping, but keeping in pieces". Russia was seen as the protagonist responsible for keeping the conflicts in the region frozen, in order to maintain a "controllable instability" for the purposes of its own power projection in the South Caucasus. Moreover, Russia was promoting progressive annexation of Abkhazia and

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Peter Semneby in RFE/RL, May 3, 2008; Vladimir Socor: The West Can Respond More Effectively to Russia's Assault on Georgia, Part II, Eurasia Daily Monitor, vol.5, issue 88, May 8, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Andrei Zagorski, leading researcher at the Moscow MGIMO-University, summarised this reservation in a paper on the Russian perception of the EU's 2008 Eastern Partnership initiative: "Any involvement of the European Union in conflict resolution in the common neighbourhood shall not challenge the Russia-led peacekeeping operations or Russia-brokered negotiating formats for conflict resolution in the Former Soviet Union. This demand does not exclude cooperation between Russia and the EU in the interest of conflict resolution or peacekeeping. However, the modalities of such cooperation were not supposed to challenge the key role of Russia".

<sup>36</sup> Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus: The EU's Role, ICG Europe Report No.173, 20 March 2006.

South Ossetia by integrating these territories into its economic, legal and security space. The open annexation of these territories was blocked by several obstacles, ranging from Russia's military conflict in Chechnya to its interest in avoiding a massive confrontation with the West.

The clearest demonstration of this Russian policy of integrating separatist entities of neighbouring states into its own legal jurisdiction was "passportisation", the awarding of Russian passports and citizenship of the Russian Federation to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>37</sup>

In this context, in 2007 Russia paid residents of Abkhazia a total of 590 million rubles in the form of pensions and allocated 100 million rubles to South Ossetia, where the overwhelming majority of the non-Georgian population were already holders of Russian passports.<sup>38</sup> According to commentaries by Russian political analysts, Moscow was using economic means "to try to caution Georgia against attempts to take back the unrecognised republics by force".<sup>39</sup>

Another aspect of "creeping annexation" was the fact that the separatist governments and security forces were manned by Russian officials. Russia appointed its former civilian and military leaders to serve in key posts in Abkhazia and especially in South Ossetia, including the *de facto* Defence Ministers of Abkhazia (Sultan Sosnaliev) and South Ossetia (Anatoly Barankevich) and the *de facto* Chief of the Abkhaz General Staff (LtGen Gennadi Zaytsev).<sup>40</sup> Russian journalist Julia Latynina once described the power elite in South Ossetia as a joint business venture between KGB generals and Ossetian entrepreneurs using money allocated by Moscow for the fight against Georgia.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Spy Scandal in Autumn 2006**

Another incident provided a vivid example of the depth of the Russian-Georgian crisis and its emotional dimension. On 27 September 2006 Georgian authorities arrested four Russian military officers, accusing them of being members of an espionage network whose main goal

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<sup>37</sup> For this legal problem see Chapter 3: "Related Legal Issues".

<sup>38</sup> Vedomosti, February 22, 2008 (The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, no.7, vol.60, March 11, 2008, p.5).

<sup>39</sup> Quotation in Vedomosti, February 22, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Stacy Closson, Georgia's Secessionist De Facto States: From Frozen to Boiling. In: Russian Analytical Digest, no.40, May 8, 2008, pp.2-5.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Die Zeit, Nr.35, August 21, 2008, p.1

was to prevent Georgia's integration into NATO. This marked a new low point in bilateral relations and triggered an exchange of mutual accusations. On the Russian side the incident strongly reinforced the already mature intention to punish Georgia. Moscow imposed heavy trade and financial sanctions against Georgia and recalled its diplomats from Tbilisi. The Georgian authorities handled the "spy affair" in a manner considered provocative not only in Russia. Georgia overplayed the incident: it did not expel the arrested officers discreetly – acceptable and standard *modus operandi* in such cases - but the men were released and transferred to OSCE officials in theatrical circumstances.

At a meeting with the Russian Security Council, President Putin complained that although Russia had consistently met its commitments to withdraw its military units from its former bases on Georgian territory "our servicemen were seized and thrown into jail". He labelled these actions as "state terrorism accompanied by hostage-taking" and alleged U.S. support for Georgian anti-Russian attacks, stating "these people think that, sheltered by their foreign sponsors, they can feel at ease and secure".<sup>42</sup> The Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Ivanov, made similar allusions at a NATO-Russia meeting in the Slovenian city of Portoroz at the end of September.<sup>43</sup> However, no Western country seemed to be prepared for a confrontation with Russia over Georgia. The EU, NATO, the UN, OSCE and other international institutions indicated deep concern over this outburst of verbal hostility in bilateral relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, calling upon both sides to mitigate their tone and to defuse tensions.

In his reaction to the Russian accusations President Saakashvili stressed Georgia's sovereignty, which included self-protection against Russian power projections.<sup>44</sup> On 28 September Russia asked the United Nations Security Council to condemn Georgia for taking "dangerous and unacceptable steps" that could destabilise the region. There was no such condemnation but members requested more information about the situation. The dispute intensified on 29 September 2006 with a statement from the Georgian Interior Ministry to the effect that Russian military "movements" had begun in territory bordering Georgia. He announced mobilisation of Russia's 58<sup>th</sup> Army, deployed in North Ossetia.

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Vladimir Solovyov in Kommersant, October 2, 2006, p.1.

<sup>43</sup> Interpress News, ITAR-TASS news agency, September 29, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> "I have been openly stating for more than a year that our counter-intelligence is working, that we have information and that we are working for the protection of our democratic system...It is high time to understand that we do not speak just empty words". Civil Georgia, www.civil.ge, September 28, 2006.

Russia continued to seek support for punitive measures against Georgia. However, this provoked negative reactions from Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Armenia it was noted that Russia was defining its relations with Georgia without taking into account the interests of Georgia's neighbours. By imposing a blockade on Georgia, which serves as Armenia's main land route to Russia, the Kremlin strengthened the effects of the blockade imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan on Armenia. Russia's blockade measures towards Georgia also adversely affected its own North Caucasian republics by closing the main border crossing between North Ossetia and Georgia. But above all, this crisis had an impact on Russian domestic affairs and affected the behaviour of Russian authorities toward the Georgian diaspora living in Russia in a way that damaged Russia's image in the world. "Until now, if government authorities contributed to public xenophobia it was through inaction, incompetence or irresponsibility. Now ethnic hostility is being incited by government figures – legislators and executive officials alike".<sup>45</sup> Some ethnic Georgians, including children, were loaded in cargo planes and expelled from Russia. Prominent Georgian intellectuals living in Russia were harassed by the tax police, Georgian businesses in Moscow were singled out by law enforcement authorities. Georgians were portrayed as the most criminal of all ethnic minorities in Russia. The campaign took an especially ugly turn when some Moscow schools were ordered to submit to the police lists of children with Georgian names.

When the EU ministers of foreign affairs expressed deep concern about the economic, political and humanitarian costs of the Russian measures against Georgia and Georgians, Konstantin Kosachev, Chairman of the State Duma Committee for International Affairs, conceded that criticism of several measures imposed by Russian executive organs on Georgians living in Russia was justified.<sup>46</sup> Reactions of protest emerged in Russia against the xenophobe reactions of their own authorities. Around a thousand demonstrators gathered in the centre of Moscow on 8 October 2006, many of them with emblems saying "I'm a Georgian".<sup>47</sup>

On 3 October 2006 in connection with the spy scandal, Russia cut air, land, sea, postal, and banking communications with Georgia. Earlier in 2006 it had slapped a ban on Georgian wine, fruit, vegetables, and mineral water, citing health concerns. Georgian officials downplayed the consequences of the sanctions. But the Georgian Ministry for Economic

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<sup>45</sup> Masha Lipman, in: Washington Post, October 21, 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 19.10.2006.

<sup>47</sup> Interpress News, October 9, 2006.

Development released a report about the possible effects of suspending economic relations with Russia, noting that Russia was Georgia's main trade partner in 2006 despite restrictions on import of Georgian agricultural products. In the previous year, imports from Russia included 53% of the electric power and 95% of the natural gas consumed in Georgia.<sup>48</sup>

Russian Parliamentary Speaker Boris Gryzlov argued that the sanctions were directed against the Georgian Government, not against the Georgian people. But it was the ordinary Georgians who were suffering. The Georgian authorities were trying to cobble together an aid program for the Georgians deported from Russia in order to prevent anti-government protests, which the Russian sanctions supposedly aimed to trigger. But the crisis did not change the domestic political climate in Georgia against the ruling elite. Before the 5 October 2007 local elections, almost all political parties, including the opposition, stated that, despite internal divisions, they had no differences with the government on the policy toward Russia. But there were also some critical commentaries on the way the Georgian Government had handled the spy affair. Georgi Khaindrava, Georgia's former Minister for Conflict Resolution, told a Tbilisi newspaper that the authorities could have exposed the Russian spy network in a more professional manner, without undue clamour, particularly in order to avoid creating problems for the 800 000 Georgians who left their country because of economic hardship and were now working in Russia.<sup>49</sup>

As a result of Russia's economic sanctions Georgian exports to Russia in 2007 amounted only to USD 53 million, a 30 percent decline from the previous year. The sanctions spurred Georgia to restructure and reorient its export policies. Eventually, they did not lead to a dramatic decline of Georgian economic growth rates. They remained high, at reportedly 12 percent of GDP.

The "spy affair" ended with the return of the Russian Ambassador to Tbilisi in January 2007 and with a lifting of at least some of the Russian sanctions against Georgia. But it left the impression of irreversibly spoiled bilateral relations and revealed emotional and irrational scars in the mutual relationship. In Georgia allegations of Russia's spy activities and its "long arm" reaching into Georgian domestic affairs continued in subsequent years and played a prominent role in government attacks on opposition forces in the domestic political crisis.<sup>50</sup> This crisis grew violent on 7 November 2007 with Georgian riot police attacking

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<sup>48</sup> Kavkaz Press, October 24, 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Vremya novostei, October 3, 2006, pp.1-2.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted by Claire Bigg, Is Moscow behind Georgian unrest? RFE/RL November 15, 2007.

demonstrators. Georgia's Interior Ministry released footage of what it said were negotiations between several opposition leaders and Russian intelligence agents. According to Temur Yakobashvili, a Georgian political analyst and later Minister for Conflict Resolution, "Russian spies are trying to influence domestic developments... Russians are not even hiding that they are seeking a regime change in Georgia by manipulating domestic political developments and influencing various political movements and leaders."<sup>51</sup>

However, this accusation was called into question in Russia and beyond. "On the domestic political scene, there's no real basis to say that the Russians are strongly involved", said Thomas de Waal, a Caucasus expert at Britain's Institute for War and Peace Reporting. "If you look at the Georgian opposition, most of them are just as anti-Russian as the government...It's obviously convenient for President Saakashvili to blame Russia in a time of crisis. I think this is a card that can be overplayed, and I think many citizens are getting a bit fed up with that."<sup>52</sup>

The Georgian finger-pointing at Moscow was only part of a broader pattern in post-Soviet societies, as Sergei Markedonov put it. "Many Russian politicians are genuinely convinced that the West is to blame for everything: the West caused the Orange Revolution, the West caused the Rose Revolution, the West demolished the Soviet Union. Georgian authorities are using exactly the same method. Only here, evil Russia replaces the evil West. Georgia, Russia, and many post-Soviet countries share a like mentality. Only the enemy changes."<sup>53</sup>

In a review of Russia's foreign policy published in March 2007, Georgia was attributed the lowest score among all of Russia's international partners. At the time, Russia's Ambassador to Georgia, Vyacheslav Kovalenko, who had recently returned to Tbilisi, gave an interview on the current state of Russia-Georgia relations to the Russian newspaper *Vremya Novostey*. To the question "What must Georgia do to normalise relations?" he answered: "First and foremost, Tbilisi must give up the mindset that there is some threat to Georgia, which supposedly emanates from its northern neighbour, and must stop presenting the matter in such a way that it is specifically Russia that is hindering the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity. Tbilisi must also understand that Russia has its own interests in the Caucasus in the sphere of security, and has its own notions about how this security may be ensured. After all,

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Sergei Markedonov, *The Paradoxes of Russia's Georgia Policy*, *Russia in Global Affairs*, April-June 2007, p.1.

the Southern Caucasus and our Northern Caucasus are in many ways a single organism. Finally, Georgia must understand that Russia is in no case hindering its course toward realisation of ‘European identity’, as is customary to say in Tbilisi”.<sup>54</sup> But in ensuing months Russia continued its coercive Georgia policy and did nothing to dissolve the other side’s “mindset that there is some threat to Georgia” and that someone is hindering the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity.

### **Incidents of Violation of Georgian Airspace**

In his annual report to Parliament, attempting to justify the Georgian adoption of NATO standards, President Saakashvili asked: “Do you remember how our territory was bombed during the Shevardnadze period?”<sup>55</sup> This was an allusion to incidents of violation of Georgian airspace by Russian airplanes in 2001 - 2002. There had been five major bombing incidents in Georgia since 2001 and Russia had denied them all. In October 2001, nine unidentified jets bombed areas of the Kodori Valley under Georgian control. In August 2002, Georgia accused Russia of bombing its northern Pankisi Gorge. In March 2007, Mi-24 helicopters bombed the Kodori and Chkhaltva Valleys, and the Chuberi Pass. In August 2007 there was an air strike on the village of Tsitebulani near South Ossetia. And in April 2008, a MiG-29 fighter was videotaped downing an unarmed Georgian reconnaissance drone over the Gali region. Additionally Georgia claimed that Russia periodically moved military equipment into Abkhazia and South Ossetia in violation of the ceasefire agreements of 1994 and 1992 respectively. In reply to Georgian accusations of military violations by the Russian side the Russian Foreign Ministry reported that in 2007 alone peacekeepers in Abkhazia claimed 158 instances in which Georgian warplanes allegedly flew over the security zone.<sup>56</sup>

The first time that Russia acknowledged the violation of Georgian airspace was shortly before the armed conflict of August 2008. At the time, Russian routine references to Georgia’s territorial integrity had already disappeared from official statements. On 10 July, Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that Russian air force planes had flown a mission over South Ossetia the preceding day. The flight was allegedly meant to prevent a Georgian military attack in this conflict zone.

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<sup>54</sup> Vremya Novostey, March 12, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted by Kommersant, February 16, 2006, p.1.

<sup>56</sup> Nezavisimaja Gazeta, June 5, 2008, p.1.



## **Countdown to the Armed Conflict: the Geopolitical Context**

Developments in the context of Georgia's unresolved regional conflicts and the bilateral Russian-Georgian relationship were overshadowed by two supra-regional international issues in 2008. The first was Kosovo's declaration of independence and its official recognition by around fifty states. The second was the NATO procedure for a decision on a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia and Ukraine. Both issues may have challenged Russia's *Weltanschauung* of a post-bipolar world. For many years Russia had felt deeply irritated by NATO enlargement. In terms of emotional impact, the dispute on Kosovo's independence brought Russia back to the year 1999 when it perceived the NATO war in Yugoslavia as a fundamental challenge to its own position in the international arena.

## **Georgia's Aspiration to Join NATO**

Among all external variables the greatest impact of the Russian-Georgian conflict has been on NATO enlargement policy, in particular with regard to the possible integration of Georgia and Ukraine. Moscow's coercive Georgia policy was initially meant to prevent NATO expansion into CIS space. This policy gained momentum with the discussion on the MAPs for Georgia and Ukraine. Russian moves against both countries were intended to show that Moscow could stop them from joining NATO.<sup>57</sup>

Admission to NATO had become a national project in Georgia. Orientation toward NATO was not only elite driven. Around 80 percent of the public supported NATO-membership - the highest popular vote among applicant countries in the past decades<sup>58</sup>. The Georgian Government repeatedly tried to set forthcoming dates for admission to full membership. Within NATO this drive was met partly with strong support, partly with scepticism. Strong support came from Washington. Within Europe it came from a nucleus of eight countries, supporting an active policy by NATO and the EU in Europe's East. Initiated in 2005 in Tbilisi by the three Baltic states, Poland, Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria joined by Sweden and the Czech Republic, a Group of New Friends of Georgia supported Georgia's goal to advance to a MAP at NATO's summit in Bucharest in the spring of 2008.<sup>59</sup> On the other side, statements by some senior NATO representatives showed a more cautious approach towards a membership perspective for Georgia in the near future.

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<sup>57</sup> Stephen Blank, *Russia and the Georgian Crisis: What Does Moscow Want?* CACI Analyst, June 11, 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Compared to: Estonia 69%, Slovenia 66%, Latvia 60%, Lithuania 46%.

<sup>59</sup> Vladimir Socor, *Friends of Georgia Hold Strategy Session in Lithuania*, Jamestown Eurasia Daily Monitor, September 17, 2007, Vol.4, Issue 171.

## Russia's Kosovo Precedent Formula

Kosovo's declaration of independence re-fuelled debates about the linkage between the fundamental international legal principles of self-determination, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Western governments and regional organisations that recognised Kosovo's declaration of independence argued a case of *sui generis*. However, even within the EU this argument was not accepted by all member states and there was no common position among them. Some of them feared the case of Kosovo would set a precedent for secessionist conflicts on their own territories.<sup>60</sup> Russia in particular rejected the *sui generis* argument and hinted at the Kosovo issue as a precedent for unresolved ("frozen") secessionist conflicts in the CIS space where Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan were involved in conflicts over breakaway regions such as Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

But Russia made use of this Kosovo precedent formula selectively, mainly as an instrument to pressure Georgia and less in the case of the Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Its involvement in this conflict differed from that in Georgia's conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and from its political position in Moldova's conflict with Transnistria. In the Karabakh conflict Russia was less directly involved and did not hold a dominant position as peacekeeper as it did in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (and Transnistria). Though Russia has a close security relationship to Armenia, in the Karabakh conflict it was less supportive of the Armenian-bound *de facto* state of Nagorno-Karabakh in comparison to its clear support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In the Transnistrian conflict Russia also stood at the side of the separatist party to the conflict extending financial and political support to the Transnistrian authorities and keeping its 14<sup>th</sup> army (around 1'200 troops) stationed in the breakaway region. But with the Moldovan Government's commitment to neutrality, which marks a relevant difference to Georgian foreign and security policy, Russia supported a peaceful settlement of this conflict.

Thus the Kosovo precedent had its deepest impact on the unresolved secessionist conflicts of Georgia and on the bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia. Already in January 2006, President Vladimir Putin had called for universal principles to settle the "frozen conflicts" in the CIS. He insisted: "We need common principles to these problems for the benefit of all people living in conflict-stricken territories... If people believe that Kosovo can be granted

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<sup>60</sup> Amanda Akcakoca, Thomas Vanhauwaert, Richard Whitman, Stefan Wolff: *After Georgia: conflict resolution in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood*, European Policy Centre April 2009, p. 9.

full independence, why then should we deny it to Abkhazia and South Ossetia?”<sup>61</sup> This line of reasoning became official Russian policy. In June 2006 the Russian Foreign Ministry reacted to Montenegro’s referendum on whether it should end its union with Serbia and to Kosovo’s accelerated movement toward independence. “Moscow respects the principle of territorial integrity, but it points out that South Ossetia’s right to self-determination is an equally respected principle in the world community”.<sup>62</sup>

Moscow and its protégés in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali now had to find a way to apply the main arguments that the West was citing in favour of Kosovo’s independence also to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The first of these was that the claim to independence was supported by a majority of the local population living in those territories. The second argument was that alleged genocide had been committed there by forces of the metropolitan state. In support of the second argument, Parliaments in Russia and in North and South Ossetia hold Georgia responsible for “genocide” committed against Ossetians in 1920 and again in the conflict of 1989 - 1992. This position was strongly expressed in the first Russian statements on the August 2008 Georgian artillery offensive on Tskhinvali, which was described by the Russian and the South Ossetian sides as a Georgian “genocide” of Ossetians, having cost the life of 2’000 people. In the weeks that followed, the number of victims was revised significantly downward.

With Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008 and its subsequent official recognition by several states, the precedent formula had gained strength. Early in March, the *de facto* Parliaments of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria addressed appeals to the Russian Parliament, the UN and other international organisations for recognition of their independence. On 6 March 2008, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that it was lifting all restrictions against Abkhazia stipulated in a CIS agreement of 1996. On 16 April President Putin ordered the Russian Government to “work together with the *de facto* authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to organise cooperation in the trade, economic, social, scientific-technical, informational, cultural and educational spheres, and also to enlist specific Russian regions in these efforts.”<sup>63</sup> International commentaries deemed these measures to be Russian diplomacy’s final departure from recognition of Georgia’s territorial integrity. President Putin justified them as “exclusively socio-economic goals which

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted by Akcakoca etc. p. 26.

<sup>62</sup> Nezavisimaja Gazeta, June 6, 2006.

<sup>63</sup> Vremja Novostej, April 17, 2006.

distinguishes them in principle from a number of countries' politicised and unlawful decisions to recognise the unilaterally proclaimed independence of Kosovo, decisions which, as has repeatedly been stressed, are precedent-setting in nature".<sup>64</sup> The *de facto* Presidents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia underpinned this formula with statements like "We have more political and legal grounds for recognition than Kosovo does".

Russia kept the promise it had made immediately after Kosovo declared independence to reassess its relations with the unrecognised entities. But it made use of this precedent formula selectively: it was used in the case of Georgia, constituted the key feature of Russia's coercive policy against Georgia and was closely connected to Georgia's NATO ambitions. But even with this enhanced use of Russia's Kosovo precedent formula Russian, Georgian and Western experts did not expect an imminent diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Kremlin. In one of his comments concerning Kosovo, President Putin announced that Russia would not repeat the mistake the West had made by formally legalising a case of secession. On the international stage and especially in Eurasian regional organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Russia strongly opposed separatism and assessed it (together with China) as one of the "evil forces" challenging global security. Russia had suppressed its own case of separatism in Chechnya with a maximum of military violence and had refused external criticism in regard to massive human rights violations during the Chechen wars as interference in its sovereignty. For over a decade Russia has ascribed to UN Security Council resolutions affirming the territorial integrity of Georgia. In this context official recognition of secessionist entities by the Kremlin would appear as a dramatic case of "double standard" – precisely the behaviour of which Russia accused the West.

This restraint finally disappeared with the armed conflict of August 2008. Already before its official recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence on 26 August 2008, Russia had significantly increased cooperation with the unrecognised entities. One day after President Putin's decree on 16 April 2008 on the close cooperation of Russian authorities with their counterparts in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali a Russian newspaper quoted Abkhaz *de facto* Foreign Minister Shamba with the following triumphant remarks: "We can see the ribbon at the finish line on the road to our recognition. And we'll cut that ribbon. We're not afraid of any backlash from Tbilisi. We're prepared for the fact that the situation in the conflict zone will heat up; Georgia may instigate that".<sup>65</sup> President Saakashvili did instigate that with the

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<sup>64</sup> Vremja Novostej, April 22, 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted by Mikhail Vignansky in Vremya novostei, April 17, 2008, p.1.

offensive against Tskhinvali and provided Russia with arguments to pursue its policy toward the Georgian secessionist conflicts.

### **The Escalation in 2008**

The year 2008 began with Mikheil Saakashvili's re-election to his second presidential term with 53.4 % of the vote. As four years before, both Georgian and Russian officials expressed a desire to improve their bilateral relations. In his inaugural address on 20 January 2008, re-elected President Saakashvili offered to "extend the hand of partnership and cooperation to Russia." In his first news conference he invited President Putin to visit Georgia and added that "one of my main regrets is that during my first presidential term relations with Russia were spoiled".<sup>66</sup>

The Russian Government reacted by sending Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to President Saakashvili's inauguration, contrary to expectations that Moscow would boycott this ceremony in Tbilisi or send a low-level delegation. Foreign Minister Lavrov was the highest-ranking Russian Government official to visit Georgia since the spy scandal in 2006. On 21 February, Presidents Putin and Saakashvili met in the Russian presidential residence Novo-Ogaryovo. President Saakashvili expressed his interest in achieving at least a limited reconciliation. At the summit, the two sides agreed to re-establish direct civilian air links. Reportedly there were talks of a joint control of borders on the Psou river and at the Roki tunnel, which provoked protests from the leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

However, the fundamental variable affecting Russian-Georgian relations did not change with President Saakashvili's second term. The re-elected President strongly reaffirmed his intention to pursue Georgia's "Euro-Atlantic orientation" and to deepen its ties with NATO. During the election campaign all of his main opponents also professed to support this orientation in Georgian foreign and security policies, with only one fringe candidate dissenting.<sup>67</sup> In Russian commentaries Georgia's sovereignty was increasingly called into question. Konstantin Kosachev, Chairman of the State Duma International Affairs Committee, declared: "Georgia is a construction that emerged in the totalitarian Soviet Union, a construction whose authorship belongs to then-dictator Iosif Stalin".<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted by Richard Weitz: Tbilisi and Moscow Ponder Next Steps after Saakashvili's Inauguration, in: CACI (Central Asia and Caucasus Institute) Analyst, February 6, 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted by Richard Weitz, *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Ekho Moskvyy, July 10; Vladimir Socor: De-Recognition of Georgia's Territorial Integrity Disqualifies Russia as "Peacekeeper", Eurasia Daily Monitor, vol.5, issue 132, July 11, 2008.

War rhetoric repeatedly flared up on all conflict sides since March-April 2008. This bellicose rhetoric around the unresolved regional conflicts in the South Caucasus was accompanied by a process of armament and a sharp rise in defence budgets in the region between 2004 and 2008. Growth in military spending in the three South Caucasian states in 2008 exceeded GDP growth dramatically. Georgia increased its military spending during this period from below 1 percent of its GDP to more than 8 percent. Likewise, the separatist entities became more militarised. Georgia made a standard accusation of Russia that it used the rotation of its peacekeeping contingents to deploy additional military forces into the conflict zones. In this context, statements that relations between Russia and Georgia were “strained to the limit of war” were repeatedly heard.

On 6 May 2008 Temur Yakobashvili, the Georgian Minister for Conflict Resolution (a post recently renamed to Minister for Reintegration), said at a news conference in Brussels that Georgia was very close to open hostilities: “We literally have to avert war”. Such statements intensified to a degree that alarmed the international community. In the following days, the Georgian side welcomed the French Foreign Minister’s attempt to prevent an armed conflict.<sup>69</sup> The European Union announced that a group of foreign ministers would head to Tbilisi to explore ways of halting the hostile actions and rhetoric that had marked Georgian-Russian relations in previous weeks. Though supportive of Tbilisi, the EU continued to aspire to a peacekeeping role, but was unwilling to commit to any actions that would set it in opposition to Moscow.<sup>70</sup>

After the July incident with a Russian airplane admittedly flying over South Ossetia, Georgia recalled its Ambassador to Russia. Gleb Pavlovsky, a political scientist with Kremlin connections, interpreted this as “a possible pre-war state of affairs in Russian-Georgian relations”.<sup>71</sup>

At first global attention with regard to the escalation was focused on Abkhazia.<sup>72</sup> In May Russia moved to increase the troop levels of its peacekeeping force in Abkhazia to 2 500 and sent railway troops on a “humanitarian mission” into the region. The Abkhaz leadership claimed that territorial defence forces had shot down five Georgian reconnaissance drones in

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<sup>69</sup> No War Thanks Kouchner – Georgian Minister Says, Civil Georgia, May 14, 2008.

<sup>70</sup> On May 9, the Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitri Rupel emphasised that the EU did not have “any intention of supporting one side against the other now”. See Nina Akhmeteli: US and EU Support for Tbilisi Grows amid Escalating Tension with Russia, Eurasia Insight, May 9, 2008.

<sup>71</sup> Interfax, July 11, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia, International Crisis Group Policy Report, June 5, 2008.

recent weeks.<sup>73</sup> NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer demanded that Moscow withdraw its railway troops and urged both sides to “engage quickly in a high-level and open dialogue to de-escalate tensions”.<sup>74</sup> In July 2008 Germany initiated a three-stage plan for a settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. The plan was developed within the framework of the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary-General. The first stage involved measures to rebuild trust between the conflict sides to lead to their signing of an agreement on the non-use of force, and the initiation of a process to bring Georgian IDPs/refugees back to Abkhazia. The second stage provided for reconstruction work financed by donor states. Not until the third stage was it planned to tackle Abkhazia’s political status. Abkhaz *de facto* President Sergei Bagapsh turned down the plan and put forward his own conditions for beginning talks with the Georgian side. “We told the German Foreign Minister to add two points to the document. First, Georgia has to pull its troops out of the upper Kodori Valley in Abkhazia. Second, it must sign an agreement on not resuming military operations”.<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile the conflict escalation on the ground shifted from Abkhazia to South Ossetia. Both the Georgians and Ossetians launched artillery attacks on each other’s villages and checkpoints. But even in July many experts did not expect that one of the parties to the conflict could be rationally intending to open hostilities. Only a few days before the armed conflict, a commentator from *Novaya Gazeta* predicted “There will be no war”. No conflict side had an interest in starting a war, according to this commentary. “Not even someone with the wildest imagination could come up with any reasons why Tskhinvali might be interested in military operations against the Georgians”. Nor could Tbilisi have any plans to wage war according to this commentary. First of all, the main condition for receiving a Membership Action Plan from NATO was stability, not open hostility. A “Blitzkrieg” seemed impossible, the Georgian economy would simply not withstand protracted military operations.<sup>76</sup> By waging war Georgia would risk losing support of the Western world that was already eroding due to the domestic political crisis and to disputes over the democratic results of the Rose Revolution. The danger of a full-scale armed conflict was rather seen in a scenario in which one of the many localised provocations in the conflict zones “could cut across the calculations

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<sup>73</sup> Interfax, May 8, 2008.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, June 5, 2008, p.1.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in *Kommersant*, July 19, 2008, p.1.

<sup>76</sup> Yury Karlenovich Simonyan, in: *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, July 28, 2008, p. 12.

of all sides“.<sup>77</sup> Some other regional and military experts did predict a full-scale armed conflict. By that time it was already too late for any diplomatic action to be effective.

## **Conclusion**

A prominent Russian expert on the Caucasus, Sergei Markedonov, characterised the Russian-Georgian relations as “rather paradoxical”. On the one hand there are many traditional ties, primarily socio-cultural. For over 200 years Georgia had been part of the Russian and Soviet Empire. Its political class was incorporated into the Tsarist establishment. Georgia was Russia’s bridgehead in its Caucasus wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the imperial outpost for the establishment of Russian military and administrative power in the whole of the region. Later on, Georgia was a Soviet Republic with its very specific experience of Stalinist terror, but a comparatively high standard of cultural autonomy in the decades after Stalin’s death. The Georgian historical narrative emphasises the two annexations by Russia in 1801 and 1921 as national traumas. A burden of mutual claims and contradictions was inherited from the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The April 1989 events, when Soviet forces brutally broke up a demonstration in Tbilisi, marked a turning point in Georgia’s tough independence course. In the period under Zviad Gamsakhurdia this course translated into a Georgian ethnocentric attitude with nationalistic slogans and enforced anti-Russian sentiments deterring non-Georgian minorities and autonomous regions from Georgia’s independence projects. Georgia’s drive for its emancipation from Russian power projection gained renewed strength after the peaceful power change from Shevardnadze to Saakashvili. The idea of “fleeing the Russian Empire” which made virtually no distinction between the contexts of pre-1917 Russia, the Soviet Empire and the post-Soviet Russian Federation had become the “keynote of its foreign policy”.<sup>78</sup>

Thus the question of who was responsible for the 2008 August armed conflict cannot be focused solely on the night from 7 to 8 August and the Georgian offensive against Tskhinvali. It has to include a broader run-up to the conflict, a longer process comprising mutual accusations, military threats, violent incidents in conflict zones, acts of a great power’s coercive policy toward an insubordinate neighbour, this neighbour’s unrealistically accelerated policy of reintegration and presenting its Western-oriented foreign and security policies as “fleeing the Russian Empire”.

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<sup>77</sup> ICG Europe Report, Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia, N°193, April 2008, S. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Sergei Markedonov: The Paradoxes of Russia’s Georgia Policy, Russia in Global Affairs, April-June 2007.



In this growing confrontation, challenges and opportunities for security and economic cooperation between Russia and Georgia were ignored or missed.<sup>79</sup> Both sides should have realised that they had a shared interest in the stability of their common neighbourhood. As the Russian Ambassador to Georgia said upon his return to Tbilisi after the spy scandal, the South and the North Caucasus constitute a single organism. A region like Pankisi was a symbol for such mutual security challenges to both Georgia and Russia. The whole border between Georgia and Russia runs along critical zones of intersection between North and South Caucasian security challenges. Both sides shared economic interests. Russia remained Georgia's most important export market and the largest labour market for the Georgian diaspora. For Russia, Georgia was important to its political, military and economic actions in the whole of the South Caucasus. More than once, Russia's punitive acts against Georgia affected Armenia. With its policy of partitioning Georgia and recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states after the 2008 August conflict, Russia did not gain any support even from its closest allies. On the other hand, Georgia had done much to alienate its breakaway regions and push them away from its own independence project. On all sides negative stereotypes and emotions prevailed over shared interests.

## **2. Relations between Georgia, the United States and NATO**

### **Introduction**

The second Bush administration defined three sets of US interests in the South Caucasus: first, its energy interests, regarded as strategic; second, the more traditional security interests, such as fighting terrorism, preventing military conflict and defending the territorial integrity of the three states in the region; and third, the democratic and economic reform of these states, to ensure their stability and legitimacy.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Gulbaat Rzchiladse: Rußland und Georgien. Konfrontation statt Kooperation, in: Osteuropa, 7/2007, 71-80, the problem of missed cooperation, p. 78-79.

<sup>80</sup> See the interview with US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Bryza in "Caucasus: U.S. Says Aliyev, Kocharian Must Show 'Political Will,'" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 23 June 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1069418.html> (accessed on 27 July 2009). See also Jim Nichol, "Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests," CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, 13 August, 2008, pp. 2-5. On the history of US-Georgian relations see Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers. A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Curzon, Richmond, Surrey, 2001; Fiona Hill, "A Not-So-Grand Strategy: U.S. Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia since 1991," an English translation of an article of *Politique étrangère*, on the website of the Brookings Institute [http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2001/02foreignpolicy\\_hill.aspx?p=1](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2001/02foreignpolicy_hill.aspx?p=1) (accessed on 28 July 2009).

The history of US-Georgian relations since 1992 – the year the two countries established diplomatic relations – may be subdivided according to the efforts the United States made to implement these policy objectives in its relations with Georgia. There was no significant US involvement designed to achieve any of these three aims during the first period, which ranges from 1992 to 1995. The signing in 1993 - 1994 of a number of oil contracts between Western (including US) companies and the Kazakh and Azeri authorities raised the question of how this oil should be transported to world markets. This had security implications for American energy policies. Energy security was a key motive for stronger US involvement in Georgia in the second period, which can be situated between 1995 and 2001. US support for Georgia's security and defence policies was given partly with the help of NATO's cooperative framework, which will also be analysed below. Meanwhile, the US war against terror led to a redefinition of American security interests in Georgia. Washington's concern for Georgia's political stability led to increased American engagement in the field of military reform.

One word of caution: the fact that both US and NATO policies on Georgia are dealt with in this section on American-Georgian relations is not based on an assumption that their policies are to be regarded as identical. Georgia was not granted a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the Bucharest meeting of April 2008 and this was a clear indication that, on the contrary, there are some basic political differences between NATO allies. NATO policies will be addressed in this section based on the observation that Georgia's integration into NATO was a dominant issue in American policies in the second and, in particular, the third period under consideration, ending with the armed conflict of August 2008.

### **1992 - 1995: No Crucial US Interests in Georgia**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 left Georgia internationally isolated, as a result of internal turmoil. The establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Georgia was delayed until April 1992,<sup>81</sup> after the forcible removal of Georgia's first elected President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the return to Tbilisi of Georgia's former leader, Eduard Shevardnadze. US attention at the time was focused on Russia, in a policy that became known as the "Russia First" approach. Questions such as the dismantling of the former Soviet nuclear arsenal in Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan and the withdrawal of the former Soviet troops from the Baltic States were considered far more vital to US security interests than the internal turmoil in Georgia.

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<sup>81</sup> See the website of the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs <http://www.mfa.gov.ge> (accessed on 24 August 2009).

There was American support, however, for Eduard Shevardnadze and his efforts to stabilise a state torn apart by ethnic and civil conflicts. Secretary of State James Baker visited Tbilisi in May 1992.<sup>82</sup> The working guidelines that the United States developed at the time for dealing with the newly independent states included support for their independence, transition to a market economy and democracy, and regional cooperation.<sup>83</sup> After Georgia's unsuccessful military engagement in Abkhazia, President Clinton assured Mr Shevardnadze that the United States stood behind his leadership and would defend the principle of territorial integrity.

Where Abkhazia and South Ossetia was concerned, Russia was mandated with a dominant role in peacekeeping and a role of facilitator in mediation, despite its own interests as a neighbouring country.

The Sochi Agreement “on principles of settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict,” signed on 24 July 1992, led to the deployment in South Ossetia of peacekeeping forces consisting of Russian, Georgian and Ossetian troops. As the UN in the case of Abkhazia, the CSCE supported the territorial integrity of Georgia in its mediation efforts on this conflict, and its mission that was established in Tbilisi in December 1992 was consequently called “Mission to Georgia” (for more details see Chapter 2 “Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Peace Efforts 1991 – 2008”). In August 1993 the UN established an Observer Mission for Georgia (UNOMIG) to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire agreement that had been reached the previous month. The negotiations on a peaceful settlement of Abkhazia were entrusted to the UN, with Russia as facilitator. UN Security Council Resolution 896 of January 1994 prescribed clearly that the status of Abkhazia was to be defined by respecting “the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the Republic of Georgia”.

In the early 1990s the future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Russian Federation, the United States and the European governments had a common position in maintaining the principle of territorial integrity. They shared the view that this principle was needed to preserve the stability of the various republics that had emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>84</sup> They rejected the idea that new international borders could result from the use of force. International borders could be changed only with the mutual consent of the governments or parties to a secessionist conflict – in line with the Helsinki Final Act. While

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<sup>82</sup> Norman Kempster, “In a Show of Support, Baker Visits Shevardnadze,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 May 1992.

<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth Sherwood-Rendall, “U.S. Policy and the Caucasus,” in: *Contemporary Caucasus Newsletter*, Issue 5, Spring 1998, p.3.

<sup>84</sup> On the legal principles underpinning the international recognition policies, see Chapter 3 “Related Legal Issues”.

the Western permanent members of the UN Security Council were seriously concerned about the situation in the Balkans, Russia was confronting instability within its own borders, including secessionist threats from Tatarstan and Chechnya of the Russian Federation. In its view, the North and South Caucasus constituted a single unit in security terms. Consequently, instability in the South would have a detrimental effect on the political situation in the North Caucasus.

The American Government – like other Western governments – did not oppose Russia’s dominant peacekeeping role in South Ossetia or Abkhazia. The fact that the Georgian authorities had accepted such an arrangement, and the lack of vital geo-strategic interests to defend in the Caucasus region seem to have been the main reasons for this attitude. Washington did not share Moscow’s view that the South Caucasus were part of Russia’s “near abroad” in political terms, but it was convinced that they had a common interest in preserving stability, on the basis of the principle of territorial integrity. In the view of the American administration of the 1990s, Russia’s involvement could increase the efficiency of the mediation efforts being made by the UN and the OSCE. Russia had unique knowledge of local political conditions, and had strong leverage over all the parties. Russia had stressed its readiness to cooperate with other countries. Moreover, it used the CIS label for its peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia, in order to stress the importance of regional organisations in solving such conflicts.

The division of labour between Russian peacekeepers and international and regional security organisations was regarded as a temporary arrangement that would pave the way for a comprehensive settlement along the lines agreed with the OSCE and the UN. The possibilities that these efforts might be frozen for about 15 years, that there might be an erosion of the common positions and, in particular, that Russia might shift its position on the question of territorial integrity, seemed not to have been duly taken into consideration.

The creation in December 1993 of the Group of Friends of Georgia to give support to the UN Secretary-General in the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process was an indication of some tension between the Western governments and Russia. The Western members of the group thought that they needed to counterbalance the support the Abkhaz authorities were receiving from Russia by firmly supporting the Georgian Government. But overall, the Clinton administration remained positive about Russia’s security role at its own southern borders. In a

visit to Moscow in January 1994, President Clinton compared Russia's stabilising potential with American policies in Panama and Grenada.<sup>85</sup>

### **1995 - 2001: Energy Security and Military Cooperation**

The signing of "the contract of the century" between Western oil companies and Azerbaijan in September 1994 led to a reorientation of American policies in the region. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) project – a major pipeline that would transport oil from Azerbaijan to the Turkish harbour of Ceyhan – became the symbol of this energy strategy.

The American policy on energy security seemed indeed to be to the advantage of Georgia, and not only in economic terms. Tbilisi wanted to overcome the perceived indifference of Washington and other Western capitals to Georgia's domestic problems by increasing its geopolitical significance. This could partly be achieved if Georgia became a bridgehead between Europe and Asia and a transit country for oil transport, in line with American energy security interests.

It soon became apparent to the United States that energy security had to be bolstered in the South Caucasus by strengthening political and economic reforms and managing the various ethnic conflicts that were dividing the region. This became of increasing concern during the second Clinton administration. In July 1997, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott declared, that conflict resolution in the South Caucasus "must be Job One for US policy in the region."<sup>86</sup>

American support of Georgia's state-building process was largely concentrated on military reforms. This support was not only bilateral but was also given within the larger military cooperation framework created by NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP). Georgia had signed the PfP Framework Document in March 1994.<sup>87</sup> It also participated in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), created by NATO in May 1997 to enhance PfP cooperation.

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<sup>85</sup> Carolyn McGiffert Ekedahl and Melvin A. Goodman, *The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze*, London, Hurst & Company, 1997, p. 277.

<sup>86</sup> "A Farewell to Flashman: American Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia," an Address by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, 21 July 1997.

<sup>87</sup> On Georgia's relationship with NATO see the paper on Georgia written by Marta Jaroszewicz in "NATO's New Role in the NIS Area, Interim Project Report: NATO and its Partners in Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus," Warsaw, Osrodek Studiow Wschodnich, Centre for Eastern Studies, December 2003, pp. 42-46.

This participation gave Georgia further opportunities to put the question of its unresolved secessionist conflicts and its problematic relations with Russia onto the Western security agenda. Georgia had to bear in mind that NATO's enlargement policies required a peaceful settlement of its internal conflicts, as stated in that organisation's 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement: "States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance."<sup>88</sup>

NATO was not involved – and did not plan to be involved – in the resolution of Georgia's internal conflicts. But it was confronted with the fact that the Georgian Government both wanted it to be involved and tried to establish a direct link between its participation in NATO activities and the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Georgia supported NATO's military campaign in Bosnia in 1995, regarding it as a model to be applied in Abkhazia. President Shevardnadze drew a parallel between the campaigns of ethnic cleansing by the Bosnian Serbs and by the Abkhaz.<sup>89</sup> The Bosnia model of state unification by means of force had a particular attraction for the Georgian leadership. It was a model that enabled Eduard Shevardnadze to speak about his principled preference for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia, without excluding the option of use of force as a last resort. It should be stressed that this model referred not to a unilateral type of humanitarian intervention against the will of the central authorities but to a military operation that had received a clear mandate from the UN Security Council.

Eduard Shevardnadze also wanted to make it clear that any Western tolerance of ethnic cleansing or secession was unacceptable. His main concern was to put Georgian interests at the forefront of the West's – and in particular NATO's – security agenda. But he failed to persuade the international community to follow suit. The American administration openly denied that it was possible to apply a Bosnia-style peace enforcement operation to Abkhazia.<sup>90</sup> Tbilisi's appeal for a peace settlement to be enforced in Abkhazia had a negative impact on Georgian-Russian relations: the use of the Bosnia model created a direct link

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<sup>88</sup> See point 6 in Chapter 1: "Purposes and Principles of Enlargement, Study on NATO Enlargement," September 1995, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/enl-9502.htm> (accessed on 28 August 2009).

<sup>89</sup> See Tim Potier, *Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A Legal Appraisal*, Kluwer Law International, The Hague, 2001, pp. 114, 123.

<sup>90</sup> The US Special Envoy to the Newly Independent States, Stephen Sestanovich, said that he did not believe it was appropriate to resolve the Abkhaz conflict through a Bosnia-style operation. *RadioFree Europe/RadioLiberty*, Newsline, 4 June, 1998.

between Georgia's integration within NATO and conflict resolution in Abkhazia, which seemed to increase Russia's distrust of American-Georgian and NATO-Georgian relations.

In addition, President Shevardnadze gave political support to NATO's military intervention in Kosovo in April 1999. In both Kosovo and Abkhazia, ethnic cleansing constituted a just cause for the use of force, which Shevardnadze considered more crucial than the fact that NATO's military operation in Kosovo did not respect Serbia's territorial integrity.

The fact that the UN Security Council had not given its approval to NATO's military operation against Serbia, however, constituted a problem. Eduard Shevardnadze conceded that, in the particular case of Abkhazia, Russia as a veto power in the UN Security Council would have to support such an operation. Without Russian support, such intervention in Abkhazia would create a new international conflict, which NATO members would be unwilling to engage in. He therefore remained prudent, refuting the necessity of unilateral action.

By the end of the 1990s Moscow may have felt increasingly marginalised in the European security structure. This was perceived to be the result of NATO's gradual eastward expansion and its military cooperation with several CIS countries within the framework of Partnership for Peace. Some Russian officials even went so far as to express the suspicion that Western countries wanted to detach the North Caucasus from Russia.

The weakness of the security sector became manifest during the second armed conflict in Chechnya, which started in December 1999 and had serious spill-over effects on neighbouring Georgia. The Pankisi Valley on the Russian-Georgian border – a region largely populated by Kists, related to the Chechens – received increasing numbers of Chechen refugees (as many as 7 000 in the first few months), together with Chechen fighters.<sup>91</sup> The territory slipped from effective state control. The Georgian Government feared that any attempt to re-establish state control over this region would lead to direct involvement in the Chechen war, which it wanted to avoid. But this restraint led to Russian accusations that Tbilisi was willingly harbouring terrorists. The lack of Georgian state control over the Pankisi Gorge also fuelled the existing concerns in Western capitals.

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<sup>91</sup> On the Pankisi crisis see Ghia Nodia, "Georgia: Dimensions of Insecurity," in Coppieters and Legvold (eds), *Statehood and Security*, op. cit, pp. 59-60 and Jaba Devdariani, "Georgia and Russia: The Troubled Road to Accommodation," in *Ibid.*, pp. 178-187.

## **2001 - 2008: Strengthening Georgia's Statehood**

The terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 led to a radical reformulation of American foreign and security policies, which also affected the US relationship with Tbilisi. Georgia received increased attention from the US, partly owing to its geographical location as part of what some called the “Greater Middle East.” It also became important as a transit country for US military aircraft supporting the war in Afghanistan. But far more relevant for the shift in American policies on Georgia seemed to have been the increasing concerns in Washington about the risk of political instability in Georgia. President Shevardnadze was not implementing the necessary political reforms, including in the fields of defence and border control. The Georgian Government's inability to handle the situation in the Pankisi Gorge led the US to launch the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) – a military programme designed to train Georgian troops – in March 2002. It became the key element in a policy that could be described as nation-building. One Georgian brigade was trained to deal with the Pankisi Gorge.

One of the aims of Georgia's participation in NATO was the reform of its security sector. It participated in numerous events and exercises as part of – or “in the spirit” of – PfP, and also took part in KFOR, the NATO-led peace support mission in Kosovo. Georgia officially applied for membership at the NATO summit in Prague in November 2002.<sup>92</sup> In 2003, the last year of Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency, Georgia's objectives with regard to its integration into NATO can be described as follows: first, to strengthen its statehood through the creation of efficient security forces. Second, to strengthen its international position, and third, to strengthen its position in the negotiations on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Georgian authorities hoped that positive developments in NATO-Russia relations would lead to more substantial involvement by Western countries in the negotiations on its secessionist conflicts, and to their participation in the peacekeeping forces.

NATO's involvement in the resolution of Georgia's secessionist conflicts was not part of NATO or American policy, however. The United States and the other NATO countries were far more interested in strengthening Georgia's statehood. The specific problems with its defence policies included : a lack of democratic control over the armed forces; one of the lowest defence budgets in the post-Soviet space; the absence of a security strategy, military

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<sup>92</sup> See “NATO's New Role in the NIS Area,” *op. cit.*, p. 43.



doctrine and planning; the inadequate use of external military assistance, and the insufficient oversight over various military institutions.<sup>93</sup>

In September 2003, when the Georgian authorities showed increasing resistance to the implementation of political and economic reforms, the United States showed its disenchantment by announcing a reduction of its aid to Georgia.<sup>94</sup> This criticism – which was also shared by other Western governments – strengthened the internal opposition to the Georgian Government.

Relations with the United States improved significantly with the Rose Revolution of November 2003. The new Government resolutely fought the Georgian irregulars infiltrating in the Gali district of Abkhazia from the Georgian side, whose activities could not be tolerated in the light of the global war against terror. Also the struggle against corruption, the new economic policies and military reform got full support from the US, prompted largely by the American apprehension of seeing Georgia turn into a failed state. Its support of the Saakashvili government seemed to have been inspired by additional motives of a primarily ideological nature. Georgia became a leading example of positive “regime change” in the region. On his state visit in Tbilisi on 10 May 2005 President Bush hailed Georgia as a “beacon of liberty”. The American President stated that the Georgian message “echoes across the world – freedom will be the future of every nation and every people on earth.”<sup>95</sup>

The United States gave political support to Georgia’s proactive policies on South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In mid-2004 it called for an expansion of the mandate of the OSCE Mission to Georgia. The US Ambassador to Georgia declared in May 2005 that a peaceful resolution to both conflicts had to be found but that “the status quo should not remain.”<sup>96</sup>

In 2005 the US launched the Sustainment and Stability Operation Program (SSOP), which followed on from the 2002 GTEP. This programme prepared the Georgian military for operations in Iraq. Light infantry equipment was delivered.<sup>97</sup> The SSOP was prolonged in July 2006 and July 2007.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>94</sup> See Dov Lynch, “Why Georgia Matters,” Chaillot Paper No. 86, February 2006, p. 22.

<sup>95</sup> Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Dov Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>97</sup> Lynch, pp. 52-53.

In late 2004 Georgia concluded an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO, which allowed the Alliance to provide more assistance in defence, institutional and political reforms. During President Saakashvili's visit to the United States on 5 July 2006, President Bush stated: "I believe that NATO would benefit with Georgia being a member of NATO, and I think Georgia would benefit."<sup>98</sup> He further spoke in favour of Georgia's receiving a Membership Action Plan (MAP). Although some Alliance members were more confident than others that Georgia had made adequate progress, in September 2006 the members came to a consensus on offering Georgia an "Intensified Dialogue" of stepped-up consultations to assist the country in continuing its reforms and furthering its aspiration to join the Alliance.

Those NATO members who were sceptical about offering Georgia a MAP may have considered that this might be perceived as a political commitment to admit Georgia and could negatively affect their relations with Russia.<sup>99</sup> Those NATO members – and particularly the United States – who favoured an acceleration of Georgia's joining NATO and an improvement of its membership prospects stressed the role of NATO's expansion and NATO partnerships in extending stability and security, through the democratisation of the defence policies of new members and partner countries and through the creation of cooperative security arrangements between democracies. They seemed convinced that the prospect of further integration, all the way to full membership, would curb any Georgian desire to use force to solve its internal conflicts, as that would be detrimental to its membership prospects.

One of the arguments put forward in the debate on NATO policy on Georgia was that, although Georgia's membership prospects were dependent on its efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution of its internal conflicts, this should not amount to making membership dependent on a final settlement. Such a direct link would make NATO-Georgia relations completely dependent on a settlement concerning Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and thus on Russia's policies in the region. And this, in turn, would amount to giving an external power – Russia – a veto over NATO's decision.

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<sup>98</sup> The White House "President Bush Welcomes President Saakashvili of Georgia to the White House," <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/07/20060705-4.html> (accessed on 28 August 2009).

<sup>99</sup> On the debate on Georgia's integration into NATO see the various contributions and particularly the presentations of Jan Henrik Van Thiel and James Mackey in "Georgian NATO Accession and Potential Impacts on the Georgian-Abkhaz Peace Process," Istanbul, Turkey, 14-15 June 2007, 14<sup>th</sup> Conference in the Series Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict, Heinrich Böll Stiftung and University of California, Irvine, [http://georgien.boell-net.de/downloads/Georgian\\_NATO\\_Accession\\_ENG.pdf](http://georgien.boell-net.de/downloads/Georgian_NATO_Accession_ENG.pdf) (accessed on 28 August 2009).

The positive initiatives undertaken by NATO, acting as a transformative power with regard to Georgia's democratisation, were, however, counterbalanced by negative – and unintended – consequences for Georgia's internal conflicts, particularly at the level of security perceptions. NATO has extensive experience of military intervention in intra-state conflicts, which increased suspicion in Moscow, and fears in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, of future NATO involvement in the breakaway entities. The American administration made strenuous diplomatic efforts to convince Russia that Georgia's integration into NATO would not go against its security interests. It also supported the idea of having delegations from Abkhazia and South Ossetia visit NATO headquarters in Brussels, where they would receive first-hand information about NATO policy.<sup>100</sup>

The Abkhaz leadership perceived Georgia's integration into NATO with a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, it would improve Georgia's military capacity and thus the potential for a forceful attempt to recover Abkhazia. It would create new hurdles for Abkhazia's international recognition. And it could lead to a marginalisation of Russia's role in the South Caucasus, and isolate Abkhazia militarily, politically and economically.<sup>101</sup> On the other hand, Georgia's integration into NATO would have direct repercussions on Russia's interests in the region. Russia's role in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict had previously been perceived by Sukhumi as being driven by strategic interests that were not identical to the Abkhaz interests. It perceived Russia's support for their regime as resulting from tactical calculations, which could very well turn against Abkhazia's independence one day. But in the view of the Abkhaz leadership, Georgia's integration into NATO had gradually been turning this tactical alliance between Russia and Abkhazia into a strategic one, and had led to stronger Russian security guarantees for Abkhazia's *de facto* independence.<sup>102</sup>

Georgia's integration into the NATO framework was conditional on further progress in democratisation. The political crisis in Georgia – beginning in the autumn of 2007 with the confrontation between the Government and the opposition, brutal attacks by the riot police on demonstrators and the closure of opposition media – increased scepticism among some NATO members about whether it was advisable to invite Georgia to participate in a MAP at the upcoming NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008. Other NATO members, however, acknowledged that Tbilisi had worked very hard to integrate into NATO, carrying out an

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>101</sup> See Viacheslav Chirikba, "Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia and NATO," in *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>102</sup> Interviews in Sukhumi, July 2008.

ambitious IPAP. From the American perspective, Georgia – with its significant contribution of approximately 2 000 troops to the military efforts in Iraq – was even perceived as being in a process of transition from a “security consumer” to a “security provider.” A further motivation for granting Georgia – and Ukraine – a MAP was that the US did not want to send a signal of weakness either to Russia or to NATO’s Eastern European members and partners.<sup>103</sup>

The American administration was not insensitive to the criticism that Georgia’s democratisation process showed serious shortcomings, but it drew different conclusions from some other NATO allies. It expressed strong concern about the Government’s policies toward the opposition in the autumn of 2007, and called on the Georgian Government to reopen its private television stations.<sup>104</sup> But in Washington’s view, the democratisation of Georgia would be best served by NATO integration.

By 2008 tensions between Georgia and Russia were running high. In January 2008 Ambassador Dmitry Rogozin, Russia’s Envoy to the Russia-NATO Council, warned that Georgian membership of NATO would destabilise the Caucasus region.<sup>105</sup> Other Russian officials expressed the opinion that a NATO invitation to Georgia to participate in a MAP would lead to Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in order to base Russian troops in these regions.<sup>106</sup>

On 14 February 2008, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer received an official request from President Saakashvili to invite Georgia to participate in a MAP at the upcoming NATO summit in Bucharest on 3 April.<sup>107</sup> Some European Alliance members raised concerns about such an option. They pointed to the need for more substantial progress in democratisation. President Bush expressed support for a MAP invitation at a meeting with President Saakashvili in Washington on 19 March 2008.<sup>108</sup> It was not only in Washington that

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<sup>103</sup> See Stefan Wagstyl, Stephen Fidler, and Chrystia Freeland, “Enlargement to the East Divides Nato Nations”, *Financial Times*, 25 January, 2008

<sup>104</sup> Ambassador Arthur Hartman, “Democratic Governance in Georgia: Lost Promises and Missed Opportunities”, in Hug (ed.), *Spotlight on Georgia*, London, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2009, p. 88.

<sup>105</sup> Jim Nichol, “Georgia (Republic) and NATO Enlargement. Issues and Implications”, CRS Report for Congress, 7 March 2008, p. 4.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>108</sup> The White House. Transcripts: President Bush and President Saakashvili Meet in the White House, 19 March 2008, <http://georgia.usembassy.gov/tr-03192008.html> (accessed on 28 August 2009).

there was strong support for a MAP for Georgia but also from the new Group of Friends of Georgia<sup>109</sup>

During a NATO meeting of foreign affairs ministers on 6 March 2008 in Brussels, several European participants showed their inclination to postpone the decision on a MAP for Georgia and Ukraine. Georgia's application was even more controversial than Ukraine's. Objections on the part of Germany, France, Belgium and some other governments were largely based on their concern about relations with Russia. The French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bernard Kouchner, urged the NATO Council to "take into account Russia's sensitivity and the important role it plays." In his view, relations with Russia were already sufficiently strained over Kosovo and a planned US missile shield in Central Europe. The French Government, and the EU as a whole, needed to cooperate with Russia. The German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, expressed a similar view.<sup>110</sup> German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated on 10 March that countries involved in regional or internal conflicts should not become members of the Alliance.<sup>111</sup>

In the view of Tbilisi, Georgia might have a peripheral position in European security affairs, but the failure of the great powers to take the interests of small countries into consideration had also been detrimental to their own interests in the past. A comparison was made between the current policy of avoiding to take a firm, principled position vis-à-vis Russia and the policies of Western democracies before the Second World War. Appeals to Georgia for moderation were to be compared to the Western appeasement policies leading to the Munich Agreements of 1938 and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. These appeasement policies had led to a major victory by Nazism and the moral defeat of the West, and had moreover been incapable of halting the inevitable outbreak of the Second World War. President

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<sup>109</sup> See Vladimir Socor, Friends of Georgia Hold Strategy Session in Lithuania, Jamestown Eurasia Daily Monitor, September 17, 2007, Vol.4, Issue 171, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=33000](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=33000) (accessed 28 August 2009).

<sup>110</sup> Vladimir Socor, Hard Debates at NATO on Georgian Membership Action Plan," Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, vol.5, issue 46, March 11, 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=33449](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=33449) (accessed on 28 August 2009) ; Vladimir Socor, "Is NATO Facing a Russian Veto Through Franco-German Hands?", Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol.5, Issue 53, 20 March, 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=33477](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=33477) (accessed on 28 August 2009).

<sup>111</sup> Socor, Germany Torpedoes Ukrainian, Georgian Membership Action Plans Ahead of NATO Meeting, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol.5, Issue 48, 13 March 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=33458](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=33458) (accessed on 28 August 2009).

Saakashvili made use of this historical comparison in an interview with the *Financial Times*, on 30 March 2008, a few days before the Bucharest meeting of 3 April.<sup>112</sup>

At the NATO summit, the Alliance members agreed that Georgia and Ukraine would one day join the Alliance, but, owing to the opposition of a number of European member states, it stopped short of offering Georgia a firm timetable for accession.

Russian military interference in Georgia intensified (see Chapter 5 “Military Events of 2008”). Violent clashes became frequent in South Ossetia. Starting in March, Georgian UAVs flying over Abkhaz territory were downed. Russia’s relationship with the United States and the other NATO countries also deteriorated further. Georgia was only one of the issues on the diverging security agendas of Russia and the United States, which included the questions of the recognition of Kosovo and the installation of anti-missile defence systems in Central Europe. Moscow may have thought that Washington would not give up the goal of Georgia’s further integration into NATO and, ultimately, its accession. Washington gave public assurances of US support for Georgia and cautioned President Saakashvili to refrain from military confrontation.

Abkhazia seemed at first to be the conflict region where risk of a violent escalation of the conflict was most likely, but tension then moved to South Ossetia. On 8 July 2008, four Russian military planes flew over South Ossetian airspace. The Russian Foreign Ministry claimed that the incursions had helped discourage Georgia from launching an imminent attack on South Ossetia. The Georgian Government denounced the incursion as violating its territorial integrity, and on 11 July recalled its Ambassador from Moscow for “consultations.”

One day after the Russian air incursions, US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice arrived in Georgia. In the face of the Russian jet manoeuvres over South Ossetia, she told reporters: “I’m going to visit a friend and I don’t expect much comment about the United States going to visit a friend.”<sup>113</sup> At a news conference in Georgia with President Saakashvili, Secretary of State Rice further stated: “We will defend our interests, defend our allies.”<sup>114</sup> She also said: “we take very, very strongly our obligations to defend our allies and no one should be

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<sup>112</sup> Interview Transcript: Mikheil Saakashvili, *Financial Times*, 30 March 2008.

<sup>113</sup> Helene Cooper and Thom Shanker, “After Mixed U.S. Messages, a War Erupted in Georgia,” *New York Times*, 13 August, 2008.

<sup>114</sup> Michael Schwartz and William J. Broad, “Rice Warns Iran That U.S. Will Defend Allies”, *New York Times*, 11 July, 2008.

confused of that.”<sup>115</sup> These remarks may have been addressed to the American allies in the Middle East that felt threatened by Iran’s nuclear policies. But announced in Tbilisi, in the middle of the growing tension between Georgia and Russia, these statements could have been taken by the Georgian Government, and its President, as being addressed to Georgia, too.

According to the *New York Times*, in a private dinner the American Secretary of State warned President Mikheil Saakashvili not to get into a military conflict with Russia that his country could not win.<sup>116</sup> According to a senior American official “she told him, in no uncertain terms, that he had to put a non-use of force pledge on the table”.<sup>117</sup>

Russia appeared at first to support a German peace plan intended to de-escalate tensions in Abkhazia, but during the visit to Moscow by German Minister for Foreign Affairs Steinmeier on 18 - 19 July, President Medvedev reportedly reiterated Russia’s and Abkhazia’s demands that Georgia sign an agreement with Abkhazia on the non-use of force as a precondition to further talks. President Medvedev also called for the retention of the existing negotiation formats and Russia’s peacekeeping role. On 21 July, US Deputy Assistant Secretary Bryza stated that it was not acceptable to consider a non-use of force pledge as a precondition for the negotiations. This issue should be on the negotiating table along with other issues, and particularly the issue of the return of internally displaced Georgians to Abkhazia, in order to come to a bargain that would move the peace process forward: “It is impossible for any negotiating party to agree to the core elements of the bargain that needs to be struck as a precondition for launching the negotiation. That is not a good-faith set of preconditions.”<sup>118</sup>

In the second half of July 2008 Russia conducted a military exercise near its border with Georgia, under the code name “Caucasus 2008.” At the same time, a joint training exercise involving about 1 000 American and 600 Georgian troops, and small forces from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine, was held at the military base of Vaziani in Georgia, under the name “Immediate Response 2008.” It was reportedly aimed among others at increasing troop

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Cooper and Shanker, *op. cit.*

<sup>117</sup> Cooper and Shanker, *op. cit.*

<sup>118</sup> See the interview with U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Bryza by Brian Whitmore: “Bryza: Does Russia Wish to be a Facilitator, or A Party to Conflict?”, RFE/RL, 21 July 2008, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Abkhazia\\_Bryza\\_Nagorno\\_Karabakh\\_Turkey\\_Armenia/1185188.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Abkhazia_Bryza_Nagorno_Karabakh_Turkey_Armenia/1185188.html) (accessed on 28 August 2009).

interoperability for operations in Iraq. Most of the troops had left Georgia by the time of the outbreak of the conflict.<sup>119</sup>

The American administration reportedly did not consider that those manoeuvres went contrary to the Western diplomatic efforts to achieve a de-escalation of the military tensions between Georgia and Russia.<sup>120</sup> About this exercise, Matthew Bryza declared on 21 July 2008, that he “would hope it enhances security throughout the region by helping to increase the professionalisation and cooperation of all these military forces; professionalism is of course the key to military security.”<sup>121</sup> According to American officials,<sup>122</sup> these manoeuvres had been preplanned a year and a half earlier. The Americans would not have had any knowledge about military preparations on the Georgian side, despite the excellent relations between the two Governments and the presence of US trainers in Georgia. The American administration would have been taken completely by surprise by the scale of the military escalation.

### **3. Relations between Georgia and the European Union**

#### **Introduction**

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, relations between the EU and Georgia concentrated on: the state-building process, including democratisation and the rule of law, market reforms and enhanced regional stability. This last objective includes support of the principle of territorial integrity in Georgia’s secessionist conflicts, regional integration and support for Georgia’s sovereignty.

The ways in which the EU has pursued these three objectives need to be considered for the whole period concerned, from the establishment of diplomatic relations between EU member

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<sup>119</sup> Jim Nichol, “Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests,” CRS Report for Congress, 13 August, 2008, p. 3; Tea Kerdzevadze, “International Large-Scale Military Exercise ‘Immediate Response 2008,’” 1 August 2008, [http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=4981&Itemid=65](http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4981&Itemid=65) (accessed on 28 August 2009).

<sup>120</sup> See the interview with Matthew Bryza, *op. cit.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Interviews with senior officials and former senior officials of the White House, the US Ministry of Defense and the State Department in Berlin and Washington on 11-12 January 2009, 29 April 2009 and 13-19 July 2009. On the presence of US military advisers in Georgia see John Vandiver, “U.S. Troops still in Georgia,” *Stars and Stripes*, 12 August 2008, <http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=56704> (accessed on 28 August 2009).



states and Georgia in 1992 up until the armed conflict of August 2008. The following is an analysis of the policies of the EU and its member states with respect to these three objectives in the periods 1992 - 1995, 1995 - 2003 and 2003 - 2008.

The first period was characterised by profound instability. Neither the EU nor its Member States had much leverage for achieving any of the objectives listed above. The second period to be considered ranges from the stabilisation of the political situation in Georgia in 1995, under the government of Eduard Shevardnadze, through to the exhaustion of his reform policies in 2003. During this time the EU created a legal framework for its bilateral relations with Georgia – the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA). The effectiveness of its aid, however, was severely hampered by the low absorption capacity of the Georgian state institutions. The third period started with a strategic reorientation by the EU toward the South Caucasus, with its new neighbourhood policies, a reorientation that preceded the Rose Revolution of 2003 and the election of Mikheil Saakashvili as Georgian President in 2004. This period ends with the armed hostilities of August 2008, which pushed the EU to take on a new responsibility in the conflict.

### **1992 - 1995: Overcoming Instability**

As far as the first priority – state-building – is concerned, neither the EU nor its Member States were present in Georgia as long as Zviad Gamsakhurdia remained in power. His policies were considered as destabilising, particularly in relation to national minorities. After the forcible removal of President Gamsakhurdia in winter 1991/92, the European governments expressed strong support for former Soviet Minister for Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze when he returned from Moscow to take the leadership of his home country in spring 1992. As far as Europe was concerned, he could rely on support from the British, French and, in particular, German Governments. Berlin seemed to appreciate his contribution to the Soviet decision not to oppose the reunification of Germany. That same year Georgia became a member of the UN and CSCE.

But these European countries had no real impact on the political situation in Georgia. Russia took the leading role in establishing a ceasefire in South Ossetia (1992) and Abkhazia (1994), and – after the defeat of Georgian troops in Abkhazia in the autumn of 1993 – in disbanding the military forces that had remained loyal to former President Gamsakhurdia. The Georgian leadership faced difficulties in bringing paramilitary forces under its control. Under these conditions, there was little room for external aid to state-building. In the period 1992 - 1995,

President Shevardnadze's leadership was regarded as the main hope for stabilisation and future state reform.

As to economic reforms, it must be borne in mind that Georgia was not economically attractive – devastated as it was by the de-industrialisation that had resulted from the dissolution of its economic links with the former Soviet space, a civil war and two secessionist conflicts. No consistent economic or tax policy could be implemented in Georgia in the very first years after its independence. The European Commission addressed the consequences of economic hardship by implementing a large-scale food assistance programme.<sup>123</sup>

Thirdly, as far as stability and international security are concerned, one may mention the active support given by the UK, France, Germany and other European countries to the Georgian position on territorial integrity within the UN, the CSCE/OSCE and in other diplomatic fora. At the time, the EU and its Member States accorded a far higher priority to achieving Russia's integration into a multilateral cooperation framework than to the integration of any other former Soviet republic – with the exception of the Baltic states. This policy of the EU and its Member States was fully in line with the so-called "Russia First" policy of the US. This did not mean that they were ready to accept Georgia's belonging to a Russian sphere of influence, to the extent that this would go against European security interests.<sup>124</sup> But the European capitals did not translate such concerns into concrete policies.

### **1995 - 2003: Establishing Partnership and Cooperation**

In 1995 substantial improvements were made to the domestic political situation in Georgia. The paramilitary organisations were marginalised and their members partly reincorporated into the Georgian armed forces. The Georgian Constitution of 1995 provided for federal options for the future settlement of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. When speaking about ethnic tolerance or political pluralism, leading politicians in Georgia were then using wording that would have been unheard of under President Gamsakhurdia. It

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<sup>123</sup> Thirty-six million euro for 1993 and 1994. See Commission of the European Communities, "Commission Staff Working Paper, Annex to 'European Neighbourhood Policy' Country Report Georgia", Brussels, SEC(2005) 288/3, [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/georgia\\_country\\_report\\_2005\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/georgia_country_report_2005_en.pdf) (accessed on 25 July 2009).

<sup>124</sup> For instance, there was some concern among NATO members about the implications of the military negotiations between Georgia and Russia for the implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). See Bruno Coppieters, "Western Security Policies and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict", in Bruno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili and Natella Akaba (eds), *Federal Practice. Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*, Brussels, VUB University Press, 2000, pp. 26-27.

demonstrated the capacity of significant currents within the political elite to create a discourse in line with the values promoted by European institutions. It created strong expectations that policies based on such values could also be implemented at the level of state institutions.

Political stabilisation favoured cooperation with the EU. A Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Georgia and the EU entered into force in July 1999. It is the legal basis for bilateral relations between the EU and Georgia, setting up a number of institutions to facilitate a regular political dialogue and enhancing cooperation in the various policy fields.

In this period, the Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) programme of the European Commission (EC) provided help in such fields as market reforms and harmonisation of Georgian legislation with that of the EU.

The second half of the 1990s saw increased Western interest in the South Caucasus, particularly in the energy sphere. This mainly concerned Azerbaijan, but also had consequences for Georgia as a strategic corridor for oil transport. The European Commission Communication of 1995 entitled “Towards a European Union Strategy for Relations with the Transcaucasian Republics” stated that the EU would have “to ensure that it will play a key role in the negotiations of contracts for the exploitation of the remaining huge reserves; in determining the routing of pipelines”.<sup>125</sup> But the EU did not conduct a co-ordinated, high-profile policy in the field of energy security.

In April 1999 Georgia became a full member of the Council of Europe. This opened a new opportunity for its participation in European integration, particularly as regards democratisation, the rule of law and minority rights.

The competitive relations between Russia and the United States – with the EU and the EU member states still as minor players – did not facilitate cooperation among external actors on security issues in the region. The Western countries did not consider that it would be possible to achieve a peaceful settlement in Abkhazia – which under President Shevardnadze was regarded as the main conflict resolution priority – without Russia’s active support. There was also a general assumption that a settlement respectful of Georgia’s territorial integrity would be in the Russian national interest, and that Russia had the leverage necessary to bring the Abkhaz to a compromise. Russia and the West had still sufficient common interests to defend – such as regional stability and the preservation of the principle of territorial integrity – to

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<sup>125</sup> “Towards a European Union Strategy for Relations with the Transcaucasian Republics, Communication from the Commission”, Com (95) 205 final, 31/5/95, <http://aei.pitt.edu/4329/> (accessed on 24 August 2009).

allow them to coordinate their policies on Abkhazia and South Ossetia at a minimal level, but not to achieve any significant breakthrough in the peace negotiations.

The EU played an active part in confidence-building policies in South Ossetia, where the situation had been relatively quiet since the establishment of a ceasefire in 1992. Here Russia and the OSCE worked together within the multilateral framework of the Joint Control Commission (JCC). In 1997 the EC started with relatively modest projects in South Ossetia, with the agreement of Tbilisi,<sup>126</sup> and in April 2001 it became a participant and an observer at meetings of the JCC.<sup>127</sup>

The EC may have found it easier to implement such programmes in South Ossetia than in Abkhazia, owing to lesser tensions among the ethnic communities. South Ossetia was receiving far less international attention at the time than Abkhazia. France, Germany and the UK were focusing on the conflict in the latter region, and did not consider that the EC's activities in South Ossetia would diminish their own role in the region. Economic rehabilitation programmes had a reasonable chance of increasing confidence among the sides, even if this had to be seen as a slow, long-term process. It was not to be expected that it would lead quickly to productive status negotiations or even solve crucial issues linked to the status of the region, such as customs control on the border with Russia.

Two parallel events marked the end of this period in EU-Georgian relations. On the one hand, a fundamental shift took place in the policy of the European Union in 2003, in anticipation of its enlargement to Eastern Europe in 2004, which would necessitate new boundary policies. The EU's security strategy paper of December 2003 defined regional stability and democracy in its neighbourhood as being among its key interests.<sup>128</sup> This had far-reaching consequences for a neighbouring region such as the South Caucasus. Good governance had to be achieved

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<sup>126</sup> Dennis Sammut, "Background to the Georgia-Ossetia Conflict and Future Prospects for Georgian-Russian Relations," Links Reports, 11 August 2008, p. 12, <http://www.links-london.org/documents/ReportontheGeorgiaOssetiaConflictandfutureofGeorgianRussianRelations.pdf> (accessed on 18 August 2009); On the EU's policies towards South Ossetia see also Damien Helly and Giorgi Gogia, "Georgian Security and the Role of the West," in Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold (eds), *Statehood and Security: Georgia After the Rose Revolution*, Cambridge/Mass., MIT Press, 2005, pp. 290-291.

<sup>127</sup> See Damien Helly, *L'Action extérieure de l'Union européenne dans le Caucase du Sud, 1992-2002. Modes d'action, influence et légitimité*, Institut d'Études politiques de Paris, thèse soutenue le 25 juin 2003, p. 367, on the Internet at [http://ecoledoctorale.sciences-po.fr/theses/theses\\_en\\_ligne/helly\\_scpo\\_2003/helly\\_scpo\\_2003.pdf](http://ecoledoctorale.sciences-po.fr/theses/theses_en_ligne/helly_scpo_2003/helly_scpo_2003.pdf) (accessed on 18 August 2009).

<sup>128</sup> "A Secure Europe in a Better World.," European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December 2003, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf> (accessed on 24 August 2009); See also Nicu Popescu and Andrew Wilson, "The Limits of Enlargement-Lite: European and Russian Power in the Troubled Neighbourhood," Policy Report, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2009, p. 13.

through the reform of the state institutions. On the other hand, President Shevardnadze's government did not implement the necessary reforms in the political, economical or security fields. The weakness of Georgian state institutions had a negative effect on relations with the EU, which was seeking stability in its broader neighbourhood.

In the period 1992 - 2004 the assistance given to Georgia by the EC had amounted to almost 420 million euros.<sup>129</sup> But the EU retrospectively characterised the situation before 2004 as one where Georgia's capacity to absorb such assistance had been hampered "by institutional and political instability, widespread corruption, severe budget constraints due to low tax collection and poor public finance management, and by a severe deterioration of governance."<sup>130</sup>

Georgian public opinion likewise demanded political and economic reforms. Mass mobilisations against flawed elections led to the resignation of President Shevardnadze in November 2003.

### **2003 - 2008: Towards Common European Policies**

The Rose Revolution of November 2003 and the accession of Mikheil Saakashvili to the Georgian presidency in January 2004 raised great expectations in EU countries. The fact that for the second time in Georgia's short post-Soviet history the transition to power had failed to follow constitutional rules (the first being after the coup d'état against the previous President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in winter 1991/92) was regarded as a minor point, when compared with the non-violent character of the revolutionary overthrow of the old regime and the overwhelming popular support for the new one.

In July 2003 the EU appointed a Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus with a mandate that encompassed assistance to the countries of the region with their reform policies.<sup>131</sup> The EUSR would also have the task of assisting with the resolution of conflicts. This would be done not through direct involvement in conflict resolution but through support for the existing mediation efforts of international organisations. The mandate of the EUSR was extended in 2006 "to assist creating the conditions for progress on settlement of conflicts." This extended mandate has permitted the new EUSR, Peter Semneby, to increase

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<sup>129</sup> Commission of the European Communities, "Commission Staff Working Paper, Annex to 'European Neighbourhood Policy' Country Report Georgia", *op.cit.*

<sup>130</sup> European Commission, "European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, Georgia, Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013", p.17, [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/enpi\\_csp\\_georgia\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/enpi_csp_georgia_en.pdf)

<sup>131</sup> See Nicu Popescu, "Europe's Unrecognised Neighbours. The EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", CEPS Working document No 260, March 2007, pp.15-16, [shop.ceps.eu/downloadfree.php?item\\_id=1476](http://shop.ceps.eu/downloadfree.php?item_id=1476) (accessed on 24 August 2009).

EU effectiveness by expressing common European positions in the region and by supporting the development of a more comprehensive policy within the EU institutions.

The appointment of a EUSR and the inclusion of the South Caucasus in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in June 2004 created a fundamentally new basis for EU-Georgia relations. The ENP offered sixteen neighbouring countries – including Georgia – perspectives for economic integration, financial assistance and political dialogue in order to stabilise them. This policy aims at bringing these countries close to the EU in legislative, economic and political terms, but without the EU offering them any prospect of membership.<sup>132</sup> The ENP also opened new regional perspectives by increasing cooperation in the Black Sea area – both Romania and Bulgaria became full members of the EU in 2007.<sup>133</sup>

The weakness of the judiciary in Georgia was one of the EU's main concerns. A rule of law mission was set up in July 2004 within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (EDSP). The objective of operation EUJUST Themis, which lasted for one year, was to support reforms in the criminal justice sector. Its efficiency has been questioned, but it had a high political value in the context of the EU's commitment to democratic reforms in the first years under President Saakashvili.<sup>134</sup>

The new Government was effective in reforming the civil service and fighting corruption, but the lack of an independent judiciary raised concerns in European capitals. There were also concerns with regard to the lack of media independence. In its Georgia Report of 2005 the European Commission mentioned that NGOs have reported significant numbers of instances of torture since the Rose Revolution.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Wilson and Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 13. See also Nicu Popescu, "The EU and South Caucasus: Learning Lessons from Moldova and Ukraine," in EuroJournal.org – *Journal of Foreign Policy of Moldova*, Issue 04/2006, [http://eurojournal.org/more.php?id=212\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_M14](http://eurojournal.org/more.php?id=212_0_1_0_M14) (accessed on 24 August 2009).

The lack of a prospect of full integration into the EU for Georgia and its breakaway territories weakened the EU's leverage for influencing the sides in these conflicts and contrasts with the EU's policies towards Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia. In the Balkans, such a membership prospect is an integral part of the EU's conflict resolution policies.

<sup>133</sup> Commission of the European Communities, Proposal for a Council Decision, Brussels, 24.10.2006, COM (2006) 623 final, p. 7.

<sup>134</sup> On EUJUST Themis see Damien Helly, "EUJUST Themis in Georgia: an Ambitious Bet on the Rule of Law": in Agnieszka Nowak (ed.), "Civilian Crisis Management: the EU Way," *Chaillot Paper* No 90, EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris, June 2006, pp. 87-102, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/index.php?id=143> (accessed on 24 August 2009).

<sup>135</sup> See Commission of the European Communities, "Commission Staff Working Paper, Annex to 'European Neighbourhood Policy' Country Report Georgia", *op.cit.*

In the run-up to the presidential elections of January 2008 the EU established the so-called Michnik Group, led by the Polish intellectual and journalist Adam Michnik, to assess the media situation. It contributed to the public discussion on that issue.<sup>136</sup> The EU put further pressure on Georgia to sign and ratify the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML), which it had pledged to finalise within one year when acceding to the Council of Europe in 1999.<sup>137</sup>

In the economic field, in 2003 Georgia's real GDP was reportedly 50 per cent below its 1990 level.<sup>138</sup> But there were also positive signs. By 2003 there was already strong economic growth, induced by construction work on the BTC pipeline, and this growth continued in ensuing years. Significantly, the share of the shadow economy began to decline as early as 2004. In June 2004 the European Commission co-chaired a donors' conference with the World Bank, at which a total of 850 million euro was pledged for the period 2004 - 2006. To achieve this aim, the EC doubled its total assistance to Georgia compared with the previous period.<sup>139</sup> Georgia was also increasingly successful in attracting foreign investment, and in the first half of 2008 real GDP growth reached 9%.<sup>140</sup> The high levels of poverty and unemployment, however, remained a severe problem.

President Saakashvili's declared aim was to re-establish Georgian statehood not only by eradicating corruption, establishing the rule of law and modernising the economy but also by "gathering in the Georgian lands." Mikheil Saakashvili claimed that he would pursue a proactive policy, capable of achieving concrete results in the short term. In his view, President Shevardnadze had not only failed to reintegrate South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but had also failed to react to the fact that the Autonomous Republic of Adjara was behaving like an independent entity. In the Government's view, the survival of Georgia as a viable state would be in jeopardy unless full control over its territory and borders were not achieved soon.

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<sup>136</sup> Peter Semneby, "The EU's Democracy Agenda in Georgia," in Adam Hug (ed.), *Spotlight on Georgia*, London, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2009, p. 83.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>138</sup> On the following see Commission of the European Communities, "Commission Staff Working Paper, Annex to 'European Neighbourhood Policy' Country Report Georgia", *op.cit.*

<sup>139</sup> European Commission, *European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, Georgia, Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013*, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>140</sup> Commission Staff Working Document Accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, *Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2008*, Brussels, 23/04/2009, SEC(2009) 513/2, p.8.

The EU and Georgia had different approaches to conflict resolution. The EU did not disagree with the idea of a proactive policy concerning conflict resolution, but it stressed the need to be cautious and to take a long-term perspective when designing conflict resolution policies. Georgia was primarily interested in turning the secessionist conflicts it was confronting into a priority on the European agenda, an objective that was not necessarily best served by a cautious, long-term approach.

This EU approach to the conflicts in Georgia was in line with the overall European approach to the conflicts in its neighbourhood. All so-called frozen conflicts at the boundaries of the EU – Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh – were to be handled with a long-term approach addressing the overall institutional and governance context and thus favouring stabilisation. The EU could make “an important contribution by working around the conflict issues, promoting similar reforms on both sides of the boundary lines to foster convergence between political, economic and legal systems enabling greater social inclusion and contributing to confidence-building.”<sup>141</sup>

European governments welcomed the fact that the Georgian authorities presented a series of concrete proposals for federal relations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but there was also serious concern that the Government tried to force the breakaway regimes into negotiations and concessions by the threat of force.<sup>142</sup> Such attempts were seen as counter productive.

In addition, the EU had a strong interest in a de-escalation of the conflictual relations between Russia and Georgia. It was largely due to Western (including European) pressure that Saakashvili felt forced to back down in August 2004 in an escalating conflict in South Ossetia, and that it proved possible to reduce the risk of an open war involving Russian troops. In the EU’s view, there was no realistic alternative to a progressive improvement of the relations between Russia and Georgia or to confidence-building between the sides in the conflicts on the breakaway territories. For the same reason the EU and EU member states

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<sup>141</sup> Commission of the European Communities, Communication from the Commission, “A Strong European Neighbourhood Policy,” Brussels 05/12/2007 COM(2007) 774 final.

<sup>142</sup> In May 2006, the then Defence Minister Okruashvili famously declared that he would resign from his position in the government if Georgia failed to reunite breakaway South Ossetia by the end of the year. See “Okruashvili Reiterates S. Ossetia Reunification Deadline”, *Civil Georgia*, 1 May 2006; “Okruashvili Quits Government” *Civil Georgia*, 17 November 2006. This statement was generally understood as being achievable only through the use of force.



voiced their concern about Russia's unilateral policies in the breakaway territories, such as Russian economic investments in Abkhazia in 2008.<sup>143</sup>

The EU and Georgia, moreover, had different views on the question of the extent to which conflict resolution should be regarded as a priority in the EU's involvement in Georgia. The ENP Action Plan endorsed by the EU-Georgia Cooperation Council in November 2006 aimed at contributing to economic integration and deepening political co-operation. These action plans are instruments designed to provide clarity on priorities, challenges and the next steps to be taken. They also provide benchmarks for further integration.<sup>144</sup> The question of the extent to which conflict resolution should be regarded as a priority was the one that raised most obstacles before an agreement on this plan could be reached. The EU was reluctant to take it up as a main priority, as requested by Tbilisi.<sup>145</sup> The 2006 ENP Action Plan eventually defined the promotion of the peaceful resolution of internal conflicts as "priority area 6" and included an extensive list of initiatives to be taken, ranging from support for "the active involvement of civil society in the conflict resolution efforts" to raising the issue of their settlement in EU-Russia political dialogue meetings.<sup>146</sup>

The strengthening of the Georgian armed forces raised some concerns in Brussels. Speaking at a conference in Slovenia on 28 August 2006, EC External Relations Commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, deplored the fact that defence expenditure in Azerbaijan and Georgia were "going through the roof" – and that this was unjustified, taking into account the enormous financial needs of education, health and small businesses.<sup>147</sup>

The need for a cautious, long-term approach was further raised when the changes in the negotiating format and the internationalisation of the peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – one of President Saakashvili's key priorities in conflict resolution – were being discussed. Since "Georgian territory's annexation is taking place behind these peacekeeping troops,"<sup>148</sup> it was about time to replace or at least weaken Russia's presence with an international force. But such a change in the peacekeeping framework was strongly

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<sup>143</sup> Reuters, "EU Concerned at Russian Moves on Abkhazia", 10 March 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/asiaCrisis/idUSL10832593> (accessed on 24 August 2009).

<sup>144</sup> Semneby, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>145</sup> See Popescu, "Europe's Unrecognised Neighbours", *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>146</sup> EU/Georgia Action Plan, [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/action\\_plans/georgia\\_enp\\_ap\\_final\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/action_plans/georgia_enp_ap_final_en.pdf) (accessed on 24 August 2009).

<sup>147</sup> "EU Warns Georgia over Increasing Defense Budget", *Civil Georgia*, 30 August 2006; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Newsline*, 30 August 2006.

<sup>148</sup> "Saakashvili reiterates peaceful approach to conflicts", *Civil Georgia*, 11 July 2006.

opposed by the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides. They were convinced that Russia would be the only external actor to react in their favour if Georgia used force to regain Abkhazia or South Ossetia. The Russians, in turn, were opposed to losing a foothold in the region. The EU was in favour of an internationalisation of security provision in the disputed territories but, also in this case, defended the view that this required the consent of the sides, and had to be addressed cautiously, with a long-term vision.

EU enlargement led to the inclusion of a number of countries which favoured stronger EU engagement on behalf of Georgia. In February 2005, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria founded the new Group of Friends of Georgia with the aim of supporting Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation.<sup>149</sup> They acted as a group within the EU by pleading, for instance, at a EU Council of Ministers meeting in Portugal in September 2007, in favour of EU negotiations with Georgia on travel visas and trade, and calling for a more resolute position towards Russia concerning its intrusions into Georgia's air space.<sup>150</sup>

The EU policies were sometimes criticised as being in favour of appeasement with Russia. From the Georgian perspective, European governments had to be convinced that they had a duty to achieve substantial progress on conflict resolution in Georgia in a timely manner, and that this issue should become a firm priority in the EU's dialogue with Moscow.

The approach to Russia was the most crucial question in the debates within the EU on all questions related to its involvement in Georgia. Tbilisi invited the EU to take over the functions of the OSCE Border Monitoring Operation (BMO) in Georgia, after Russia's veto to the continuation of this operation by the OSCE Mission to Georgia at the end of 2004.<sup>151</sup> Not wishing to irritate Russia, the EU was reluctant to initiate such a large-scale operation, but it decided in 2005 to deploy a small Border Support Team, under the authority of the EUSR, initially with only three experts. The team was to improve Georgia's border management. This would help to prevent Russian accusations that Georgia was not controlling its borders and would thus contribute to de-escalate Georgian-Russian tensions. The number of experts was gradually increased.

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<sup>149</sup> Vladimir Socor, "New Group of Georgia's Friends Founded" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 February 2005, Vol. 2, Issue 26.

<sup>150</sup> Vladimir Socor, "Friends of Georgia hold Strategy Session in Lithuania," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17 September 2007, Vol. 4, Issue 171.

<sup>151</sup> On the following see Popescu, *Europe's Unrecognized Neighbours*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

This operation showed the intention of the EU to address the Georgian-Russian tensions at a relatively early stage of its escalation. The fact that the operation started with small steps, to be gradually strengthened over time, illustrates the cautious approach chosen by Brussels. This is also demonstrated by the fact that the operation was given low visibility – contrasting with other EU missions. Strengthening border management is, moreover, a long-term objective, which is also characteristic of the EU approach to conflict resolution in Georgia.

The EU's cautious, long-term approach proved not to be sufficient in dealing with the type of conflict in which Georgia and Russia were engaged. It needed to be combined with a resolute policy, once the low-intensity conflicts in the breakaway territories risked developing into large-scale hostilities. In June 2008, a few weeks before the outbreak of the armed conflict, the EU High Representative, Javier Solana, visited Tbilisi and Sukhumi, to advocate new peace talks. In July 2008 German Foreign Affairs Minister Steinmeier presented a peace plan to the authorities in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. With the outbreak of the armed hostilities in South Ossetia, President Sarkozy acted decisively to achieve a cease fire. At the beginning of October, the EU succeeded in deploying “more than 200 monitors from 22 Member States on the ground. This has been the fastest deployment of a mission the EU has ever done.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> See EUMM – European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, What is EUMM?, [http://www.eumm.eu/en/about\\_eumm](http://www.eumm.eu/en/about_eumm) (accessed on 24 August 2009).