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RUSSIA AND THE CONFLICT IN GEORGIA

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Editorial

Message from the Editors

Dear Readers,

This issue of the Russian Analytical Digest presents articles about the August fighting in the Caucasus from a variety of different perspectives. Each article represents the views of its author, but not necessarily the views of the RAD editors. We have tried to be as comprehensive as possible in our selection of texts.

RAD Editors

Analysis

Caucasus Conflict Breaks Old Rules of the Game

By Sergey Markedonov, Moscow

Abstract

In August 2008, the years-long Georgian-Ossetian conflict reached a new climax in the “five-day war.” This outbreak of fighting was the third armed conflict between Georgia and the unrecognized republic of South Ossetia (de jure a part of the Georgian state) during the last 17 years. The sides fought for the first time in 1991–2 and again in August 2004. However, the military battle of August 2008 qualitatively different from the two previous ones because the Russian military participated directly in it. In contrast to the actions of separate Russian soldiers and units during the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–3, the Kremlin not only supported what was happening on the ground, but named the exercise “Forcing Georgia to Peace,” in an effort to save the Ossetian people from a large-scale humanitarian catastrophe. In contrast to the previous Georgian-Ossetian battles, this time in the conflict between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali (and also between Moscow and Tbilisi), the West was actively involved. The states of the Commonwealth of Independent States also were more active than they had been in the 1990s. This activity focused in particular around Ukraine and the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which is based in Crimea and participated in the conflict. For the first time in 17 years, Tbilisi fought with separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on two fronts. In August 2008, the events in and around South Ossetia were the main questions on the international agenda. Most prominently, during the first days of the conflict, the UN Security Council met to discuss the situation in the Caucasus three times.

Several Stages of Conflict

The Georgian-Ossetian conflict evolved through several stages from a local conflict in a remote and poorly known part of the world into an event of international significance. The first stage (1988–89) was ideological. In this period the battling sides defined their main claims against each other and formed the underlying ethno-political mythologies of the future conflict. The second stage (1989–91) focused on politics and the law. Over the course of two years, the Georgian and Ossetian antagonists conducted a legislative (status) war.

The third stage (January 1991–June 1992) was armed conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia. In the course of the military activities, Georgian units stormed Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, three

times (February 1991, March 1991, and June 1992). North Ossetia, a region in the Russian Federation’s North Caucasus, was drawn into the conflict since it received approximately 43,000 refugees from South Ossetia and other parts of Georgia. Russia had no choice but to participate since the conflict flowed onto its territory. In the beginning of the 1990s refugees from South Ossetia and Georgia proper made up 16 percent of the population of North Ossetia. Upon arriving in North Ossetia, these refugees were drawn into a different conflict, the one between the Ossetians and the Ingush. The first violence in this conflict occurred over the disputed Prigorodnyi Raion in 1992 and the dispute remains unresolved to this day. No other foreign policy problem has such a direct impact on Russia’s internal security.

Freezing the Conflict

On June 24, 1992 Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze signed the Dagomyss (Sochi) agreement on the principles for regulating the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Shortly thereafter, on July 14, peacekeeping operations began in South Ossetia, with the introduction of Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian peace-keeping battalions. Military operations ended and a Joint Control Commission (Russia-Georgia, South Ossetia-North Ossetia) was created to monitor the ceasefire.

In this way in 1992 the armed conflict was “frozen” and the fourth stage of the conflict began. It lasted until May 2004. In contrast to the situation in Abkhazia, there were never large-scale ethnic cleansings of the Georgian population in South Ossetia. Until August 2008, Georgians and Ossetians lived side by side. Even the constitution of the unrecognized South Ossetia republic recognized Georgian as a minority state language. Shootings, blockades, and provocations came to an end. During the “frozen” stage of the conflict, the sides managed to keep relative peace. There was direct bus service between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali until 2004 and markets (such as Ergneti) functioned where Georgian and Ossetians traded together. Tbilisi and Tskhinvali mutually recognized automobile registrations. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that the basis of the economy in the separatist region was contraband trade conducted by members of both ethnic groups. However, this black market strengthened ties between South Ossetia and Georgia. In an informal way, it established mutual trust between the two conflicting societies. Moreover, during 12 years they developed significant positive potential in the conflict resolution process. First, Georgian and Russian battalions carried out the peace-keeping mission. Second, the parties signed important documents providing for the rehabilitation of conflict zones. Among these, especially important were the Memorandum on measures for providing security and strengthening mutual trust between the sides in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict of May 16, 1996, and the Russian-Georgian inter-governmental Agreement on cooperation in restoring the economy in the zone of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and on the return of refugees from December 3, 2000.

Unfreezing the Conflict

The fifth stage can be characterized as the “unfreezing” of the conflict. It began with an attempt by official Tbilisi to revise the existing balance of power in South Ossetia and the political-legal format for the peace-keeping operations there. On July 20, 2004, the president of Georgia publicly announced that he did

not exclude the possibility of renouncing the Dagomyss agreement. “If it is impossible to raise a Georgian flag in Tskhinvali Raion within the framework of the treaty, I am ready to exit from this agreement,” he declared. With this statement, Saakashvili demonstrated a desire to achieve three goals:

- Internationalizing the Georgian-Ossetian conflict by involving the US and European countries in its resolution;
- Reformatting the conflict from Georgian-Ossetian to Georgian-Russian and presenting it as an example of Russian neo-imperialism;
- Rejecting the exclusive role for Russia as a guarantor of peace in the region.

The realization of these three goals became the essence of the fifth stage of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, which ran from 2004 to 2008. The second war took place August 8–19, 2004, in South Ossetia. This armed standoff involved the use of infantry and artillery. Although the two sides managed to separate themselves by the end of August, that month began a new wave of shootings, attacks, provocations, and blockades along important routes of communication.

Old Rules of the Game No Longer Work

By August 7, 2008, the status quo in Southern Ossetia and to a lesser degree Abkhazia was broken. The new stage of conflict in South Ossetia changed the political-legal and military configuration not only in the two “hot spots” of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but exerted a serious influence on the entire ethno-political situation in Europe.

From this date, the old rules of the game that took shape after the collapse of the Soviet Union no longer work in the Caucasus, and possibly in the Black Sea region and even in the CIS as a whole. In August 2008 Eurasia witnessed a decisive overload of conflicts. An extremely important new precedent has been set in which the legal and political agreements, guaranteeing the status quo and the freezing of conflicts, no longer works. Neither Georgia, nor Russia now observes them. Georgia refuses to follow the Dagomyss and Moscow agreements regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia’s leadership now widely interprets the understanding of peacekeeping operations. Russia has clearly exceeded the limit for 3,000 peacekeepers. One cannot help but notice the use of special purpose units in the conflict zones, since they are clearly not involved in peace-keeping. Additionally, the Russian troops went beyond the geographical limits of the security zone defined in the 1992 and 1994 agreements by sending troops to such Georgian cities as Gori, Poti, and Senaki. Of course, several of Russia’s actions are reactions to the unfreezing of the conflict started by Georgia. But

they objectively work against the earlier rules of the game. In 2008, the conflicts within the CIS went to a qualitatively new level. If these rules were defined in the beginning of the 1990s directly by the process of the collapse of the Soviet Union, today they are determined not by the inertia of the past, but by the current dynamics of development and the construction of new nation-states.

There are no more frozen conflicts. This reality from the 1990s disappeared with the “Yeltsin generation.” Now conflicts are planned and resolved by a post-Soviet generation of politicians. However, this generation is developing new rules of the game as it goes. What the new configuration will be we’ll see in the near future. In 2008, not only the states of the South Caucasus, but also Ukraine, announced its intention to move beyond previous agreements. Kiev’s plan to block the ships of the Black Sea Fleet from returning to the base in the Crimea is an assault on the entire complex of Russian-Ukrainian agreements.

Redefining Borders

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first redrawing of borders took place. These lines were not always accepted as legitimate. The breakup of the Soviet Union according to the borders of its 15 republics (which seemed logical from the outside) provoked mixed reactions among the former autonomous formations, who were not entirely pleased that the former union republics became independent countries. The result was ethnic conflicts, which created winners and losers. Some states were not interested in preserving the results of the first effort at line-drawing. Accordingly, they had an interest in revising the boundaries with the aid of various external forces. The losers did not accept the situation that appeared after the conflicts were frozen and they made it a priority to change them by any means possible.

For South Ossetia, the five-day war had tragic consequences. Today, the politicians and experts cannot name the exact number of people killed. In fact, such numbers amount to political arithmetic for the various interested parties. The infrastructure of South Ossetia is effectively destroyed and without the Russian intervention, the region would have suffered the same fate as the Republic of Serbian Krajina, a Serb separatist region of Croatia that was ultimately reintegrated back into Croatia in an effort to preserve its territorial integrity. Many of the buildings have been destroyed and numerous refugees have fled their homes.

For the Georgians, the five days of August were also a terrible catastrophe. They effectively spelled the end of the “united Georgia” project. After the third war in 17 years, it will hardly be possible to reintegrate the

citizens of South Ossetia into Georgia. Additionally, Georgia received a new wave of refugees from South Ossetia. At the same time, we must point out that between 2004 and 2008 the ethnic Georgian villages on the so-called Liakhv corridor (Tamarasheni, Kekhvi, Achabeti, and Kurta) were well equipped as cement fortresses, well armed, and supplied with high-tech equipment from Tbilisi. These villages blockaded Tskhinvali, cut off its supplies, and closed the Transcaucasus highway. In 2008, the Georgian population of these villages ended up paying for the adventures of the Tbilisi politicians. As former parliamentarian Ivlian Haindrava correctly pointed out, “the teenage complexes of the commander-in-chief brought this unhappiness to the lives and health of thousands of people.”

By formal criteria, Russia was the winner. Its actions were justified, taking into account the many connections between the security of the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus. Russia succeeded in blocking the total destruction of the military-political infrastructure of South Ossetia. Russia temporarily took control of the city of Gori, which over the last two years was a staging ground for the Georgian attack. The city housed a military hospital, morgue, and other elements of the military rear. Georgian subunits were pushed out of the upper parts of the Kodori Gorge, where they had arrived two years ago in violation of the Moscow agreement of 1994. However, through its actions, Russia also helped destroy the status quo and unfroze the conflict. The benefits from the confrontation with the West are not yet visible, while the costs are all too clear. In conditions of a complete collapse of security in the Caucasus, attempts for international intervention will only increase. The success of the military campaign could also give Moscow the illusion that complicated problems can be solved at one stroke without long negotiations and complex procedures (was it really too difficult to convene the Federation Council to give the actions of the Russian soldiers and officers legal form?).

The Role of the Russian Military Abroad

For the first time in many years, Russia took military action beyond its borders. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian military and border guards participated in two civil wars in Tajikistan (1992–1997) and Georgia (1993). However, after these events, the Russian army participated in military activities only on its own territory.

In 2008 the format of the Russian army’s participation abroad differed greatly from its historical experience in both the imperial and Soviet periods. The Russian forces did not seek to resolve ideological issues as they had in putting down the Hungarian rebellion of 1849 or during the events in Budapest in 1956 or in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The goal also was not terri-

torial expansion, although Tbilisi is accusing Moscow of this. The main goal of the exercise was to protect the security of the North Caucasus. If Russia had remained quiet in the case of South Ossetia, in the North Caucasus, there would have been forces who would have been ready to replay the battle for Prigorodnyi Raion. It is another question why Russia either cannot or will not articulate this national interest, fearing that the country will be seen as weak or vulnerable. Whatever the case, Russia emphasized its role in the “near abroad,” analogous to the role of the US in Latin America, Israel in the Middle East, Australia in Oceania, and France in its former African colonies. Russia has laid out a qualitatively new designation for its zone of vital and legitimate interests.

International Consequences

The project to build up a Commonwealth of Independent States has now finally collapsed. This is one of the key results of the “five-day war.” The crux of the matter is not simply Georgia’s exit from the group and Ukraine’s willingness to leave. The real issue is the way that the members view this institution. Even Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Belarus, which have a reputation as the main Eurasian partners of Russia, abstained from one-sided evaluations of the war. Most members of the CIS have their own separatist “skeletons in the closet” and therefore are afraid of Russia gaining too much power since it presents a threat to their own unity. Therefore, the CIS is no longer an appropriate instrument for developing common approaches and methodologies for solving conflicts. The five-day war only strengthened this tendency.

Likewise, the alter-CIS institution, GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) also did not prove very effective or unified in its positions. In the person of its president, Ukraine took a pro-Georgia position, although there were many different opinions inside the country. The announcement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan on August 8 in support of Georgia’s territorial unity consisted of general phrases (“on the compliance of the Georgian operation with ‘international law’”) and did not receive any further development. Baku preferred to be careful since it is interested in stable relations with Russia. In contrast to Georgia, Azerbaijan has not built its foreign policy on the basis of sharp confrontation. Baku sees Russia as a counterweight to the West, with which Azerbaijan’s relations are not as close as Georgia’s. Moldova’s position was

also cautious since it wants to reintegrate with the unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) and is willing to accept important Russian conditions, such as not joining NATO, neutrality, and the recognition of Russian property on its territory. Accordingly, within GUAM there were various positions toward the Russian actions and varying degrees of willingness to enter into conflict with Moscow.

The main theme raised by the “five-day war” is the self-determination of unrecognized republics. In “freezing” the conflicts at the beginning of the 1990s, Russia gave its agreement to the existence of such unrecognized republics as the main result of the conflicts. The frozen status meant that the resolution of the conflict would be put off to a better time, with a more profitable political situation and the achievement of compromise among the various sides. In such conditions, predetermining the status of the disputed territories would not be rational. Thus, the unresolved status of the de facto states defined the political reality of the 1990s. This reality included preserving the status quo and the absence of significant military activity (in Abkhazia, there were attempts to change the republic’s status in 1998 and 2001, but they were nowhere near the scale of Tskhinvali 2008). The relative peace gave hope that in some form the sides would be able to agree. Now, the self-determination of unrecognized states will be one more instrument of influence for Russia, a situation that cannot help but arouse tensions among its neighbors.

Finally (in order of discussion rather than importance), is the role of the West. There is no united position among the US, countries of old Europe, and new members of the European Union. Only the representatives of the US pursued a consistently pro-Georgian policy. The others were more reserved. Even within the confines of old and new Europe, there were different opinions. Nevertheless, overall, the West demonstrated the limited nature of its resources for influencing the situation. There were many emotions, ideologies and even more stereotypes from the past, but there was insufficient pragmatism.

In August 2008 we face a new South Caucasus with a qualitatively new agenda. After the Tskhinvali blitzkrieg, Georgia has almost no chance to restore its territorial unity. Return to the status quo is also impossible since Russia on August 26, 2008 has formally recognized the independent status of the two territories. However, the work on determining exactly what this status means is only beginning.

About the author

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Analysis

Eyes Wide Open

By Ivlian Haindrava, Tbilisi

Abstract

The latest events in Georgia highlighted new realities emerging in the South Caucasus as well as in Europe as a whole. Direct, large-scale Russian aggression against its neighboring state followed by the unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia prove that, besides abusing its energy power, Russia will not hesitate to resort to military force while defending and advancing its interests. At the same time, the inadequacy of Georgia's leadership is a clear indication of serious problems inside the country requiring immediate and fundamental political reforms. Those reforms should prevent irresponsible decision-making by establishing a system of checks and balances and rule of law, while providing institutional guarantees for pluralism, democracy, and the development of a free society.

Another Excuse for Saakashvili?

The Russian-Georgian war triggered a variety of controversial, sometimes opposing, assessments and generalizations. With a few exceptions, one can categorize them into two main views:

1. The Georgian government made an adventurous attempt to resolve the conflict in South Ossetia by using force, but was stopped by the Russian response, which at one blow undid the Gordian knot of endless conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
2. The Russian Federation launched deliberate aggression against sovereign and democratic Georgia, seeking to replace Georgia's pro-western president, reorient the country's foreign policy, and complete the decade-and-a-half-long process of creeping annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Such oversimplified visions arouse both bewilderment and disappointment simultaneously. Bewilderment results from the fact that even though the situation is extremely complicated and dangerous, it is not so intricate that experienced politicians and analysts should be confused and/or disoriented. Disappointment comes from the politically-motivated misuse of casualty counts to rescue one's political power or even political existence and impudently demonstrate another's imperial ambitions.

It is no secret that a great-power spirit is dominating the Kremlin again, one that traditionally manifests itself in brute force. Regardless of what the Putin/Medvedev team do, however, we should not consider Saakashvili automatically to be a democrat and liberal. At the same time, infantile and irresponsible leadership in Tbilisi should not be justification for Russian aggression either. One should keep in mind that the threats coming from the two regimes, which confront each other while adopting similar methods of ruling at home and interacting on the other, are of incomparably different

scale. Though the "enfant terrible" Saakashvili has produced a series of headaches for Europe, he mainly generates problems and troubles for his own people. The neo-imperialistic undertakings of Putin/Medvedev, in contrast, have reached a continental scale. Correspondingly, the problem of Russia under this tandem has become a global issue and only the consolidated international efforts of all democratic forces, working on the basis of a well-designed, long-term strategy, may succeed in dealing with it. As for Georgia – at least some of the problems Saakashvili generated may be resolved sooner and in a relatively easy manner.

The necessary (but not sufficient) precondition for achieving real positive change in Georgia is modifying the Western way of communicating and cooperating with the country. The West's extensive identification of Saakashvili with Georgia exceeds even the comparable case under Shevardnadze. The West excused Saakashvili's first adventure in South Ossetia in 2004 as the result of youth and inexperience; it pardoned the opposition crackdown of November 2007 by declaring Saakashvili wrong but having learned his lesson; and it overlooked the rigged elections of 2008, declaring "Who else but Saakashvili?" Such permissiveness finally led him to August 2008. The tactics of "eyes wide shut" prevailing in Washington D.C. towards Saakashvili's authoritarian manners have not been revised since President Bush called Georgia a "beacon of democracy" while visiting Tbilisi in May 2005. Tbilisi more than once either did not hear or misinterpreted the sophisticated diplomatic language of European "soft power."

Georgian Government Performed Poorly

The Georgian government failed to score high marks for the August 2008 events in political, military, humanitarian, and economic areas.

Many now question the predictability of Georgian policies. The prospects for reintegrating Abkhazia and South Ossetia were vague before the conflict; now the situation is almost hopeless. Chances for NATO integration have hardly been bolstered. The fragile stability in the region has been undermined, while the Russian military presence increased dramatically. Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, following the West's controversial recognition of Kosovo, feeds separatist's aspirations not only in the South Caucasus, but also far beyond. The dangerously increased tension in Western-Russian relations calls into question the international community's ability to find sustainable solutions for Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran, and further undermines the efficiency of such international organizations as the UN, OSCE or Council of Europe.

Georgia's militarization – including enormous military spending (about 25 percent of the state budget and up to 8 percent of GDP), extensive yearly increases in the number of servicemen, and expensive programs for training reservists – proved to be inexpedient. A country with the resources available to Georgia simply cannot afford to have 37,000 troops that meet NATO requirements; a figure of 15,000 may be more realistic. By comparison, the military forces of all three Baltic States taken together are just less than 8,000. At the same time, Russia has now ruined the military infrastructure in Georgia, destroying some equipment and taking other material to Russia.

Humanitarian losses are the most painful since it will be impossible to erase what has happened. Hundreds of lives were lost, thousands were traumatized physically and/or mentally, tens of thousands joined the list of refugees and IDPs, while dwellings and entire villages were wiped out. Georgian Defense Minister Davit Kezerashvili admitted that Georgian forces used the "GRAD" BM-21 multiple rocket system to target administrative buildings in Tskhinvali. When used in an urban environment, GRAD rockets inevitably cause collateral damage; which translates to simply killing peaceful residents of the town. After the Georgian retreat, Ossetian fighters and Cossaks, who followed the advancing Russian troops, devastated Georgian villages; Russian aviation bombarded a number of towns and villages beyond the zone of military actions, reportedly using unconventional weapons.

There are consequences for the Georgian economy that are still to be carefully calculated. Damaged communications and infrastructure, such as the Poti sea port facilities, may be promptly restored thanks to anticipated Western support. But what about private business investments in a vulnerable country with an unpredictable government? After all, the vitally important East-West transportation artery (roads, railways, and oil

and natural gas pipelines) passes within easy range of the Russian military units deployed in South Ossetia. About 20,000 ethnic Georgians expelled from South Ossetia and the Kodori gorge in upper Abkhazia must be supported over an uncertain period of time.

Given these high costs can Georgia expect any benefits?

The psychological and moral consequences of the conflict leave no room for optimism. The martial law introduced in Georgia for 15 days has been extended for another 15 days. The official propaganda on government-controlled TV channels totally disorients the population and is actually directed towards achieving one central goal: justifying Saakashvili and even presenting him as the savior of the nation (some in the US, such as Richard Holbrooke, stick to the same agenda). No reliable data about casualties; no data about the costs either of the military operation or the economic damages are given; no time on governmental TV-channels is available for alternative opinions. The state-controlled media seek to create the illusion that everything that happened was the only way towards restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. The president promises to rebuild an army that will be ten times stronger than it was. Georgians continue to live in the medley of lies and bragging.

Some claim that the Russians prepared a trap for Saakashvili. Russia's North Caucasus military grouping and the Black Sea Fleet were in operational readiness well before the hostilities started. If your neighbor brings a huge cannon, loads it, and aims at your house, one can, if he wishes, take this as "a trap." But it seems too risky to start throwing stones at this cannon. The best known way not to be entrapped is to avoid the trap. Saakashvili's government not only failed to do so, but took a disastrous step directly into the trap, despite consistent warnings from Western partners and allies. One may speculate about whether Russia would have invaded Georgia anyway. But one can hardly agree that the main function of the Georgian government is to unveil to the rest of the world how dangerous Russia has become and what threats it poses. More powerful and better protected parties, whose resources far exceed those of Georgia, should carry such a burden.

Georgians Should Share Responsibility

Georgians became the victims of both external and internal circumstances. They hardly can be blamed for the former, but they really are responsible for the latter. A lack of common sense can be observed in Georgia. The weakness of the political institutions that leaves so much space for arbitrariness in decision-making may not last for long. That is why it is the people of Georgia in the first place who must draw adequate conclusions,

part with their illusions and face the existing realities with eyes wide open.

However, it seems that Georgia is not the only place on the earth experiencing a deficit of common sense. The August 2008 events demonstrated, inter alia, the dangerous explosiveness of unresolved conflicts that were carelessly maintained in a “frozen” state for decades;

and the easiness of transforming them into hotspots. These events clearly demonstrated how fragile the stability on the EU-Russia frontier is; and that the “periphery” of Europe happened to be very close and important to the “core” of the EU. That is why everybody’s eyes in politics should be wide open all the time.

About the author

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Questions and Answers

Interview with Dr. Viacheslav Chirikba, Adviser on Foreign Policy to the President of Abkhazia

Russian Analytical Digest: Why has the situation turned from bad to worse in recent months? Why has Georgia decided to intervene militarily in South Ossetia? Why in South Ossetia and not also in Abkhazia?

Viacheslav Chirikba: One has, of course, to ask the Georgian leadership why they decided to start an all-out military assault on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinval in early August, thus violating all previously signed agreements and destroying, together with the peaceful city, the 16-year-old conflict resolution efforts. We don’t know much about the decision-making process in the Georgian leadership, and what role the numerous advisers to this leadership – American, Israeli, others – played in taking decisions on matters of crucial military and political importance.

But the Georgian motives are quite obvious. Georgia desperately needed to show the West, before the NATO ministerial meeting in December this year, that it was capable of restoring effective control over its break-away republics. South Ossetia, in comparison to Abkhazia, was seen as a relatively easy target, given that it had a much smaller army, that there were many Georgian enclaves deep inside South Ossetian territory and that it had very limited ground access to Russian territory – only through the Roki tunnel. If the blitzkrieg were successful, and Saakashvili thought it had all chances to be, then one of two great remaining obstacles on the way to its desired NATO membership – South Ossetia and Abkhazia – would have been removed.

After the attack failed, Saakashvili blamed the Americans for their false assurances that Russia wouldn’t react militarily to the assault on South Ossetia. Indeed, these calculations proved to be wrong, quite fatally for Mr. Saakashvili and for his weak, but fiercely nationalistic, country. I personally tend to believe that the Americans eventually did give Saakashvili the green light for this military campaign, whatever their own considerations, which might not necessarily coincide in all details with those of Saakashvili. As one piece of indirect evidence for this, I can refer to the talk between Assistant Deputy Secretary of State Matthew Bryza and the American Ambassador to Georgia John Teft with Abkhazia’s Security Council Secretary Stanislav Lakoba and me, as presidential adviser on foreign policy, which took place in the Abkhazian capital Sukhum on 25 July 2008. Bryza said that the situation was very tense and that they were afraid that the “hot-headed boys” in Tbilisi would *do things*, and that if there were no immediate talks, *August would be hot*.

RAD: Do you think Russia was right to intervene in South Ossetia? Do you think Russia was right to move into Abkhazia as well and into Georgia proper?

Chirikba: It is inconceivable to imagine that Russia would sit idly observing as its major political ally in the South Caucasus was being attacked by Tbilisi. The majority of the population of South Ossetia, as was probably known to Mr. Saakashvili, is Russian citizens and Russia was obliged by its constitution to protect them with all available means. It is remarkable that in the wake of the Georgian invasion, Russia first tried to secure a UN Security Council resolu-

tion on a cease-fire forbidding the use of force in this conflict, but the US and UK blocked the resolution, arguing that Georgia was entitled to use arms when necessary. So, we've got what we've got.

It is not quite a matter of "right" and "wrong" in judging the Russian actions. Were the coalition forces right in assaulting Afghanistan and dismantling its Taliban government in the wake of the 11 September attack on America? Were the NATO forces right in intervening in the Bosnian conflict and thus stopping the massacres? These are uneasy questions, and the answers can never be simplistic or black and white.

If Saakashvili's war on South Ossetia had been successful and *if* he'd won, there is no doubt that the territory of South Ossetia would have been cleansed of its indigenous Ossetian population (hence the Georgian name of their military operation, "Clean Field"), and, whatever the Russian motives, Russia prevented this from happening.

RAD: How have the Abkhaz (the people, the media, the politicians) reacted to Georgia's intervention? What was the mood in Abkhazia during the time of confrontation?

Chirikba: The Abkhazians knew all too well that they could have been the target of Georgia's deadly attacks, if it were not for the South Ossetians. They never trusted the Georgians, and their worst expectations were once again confirmed by this latest Georgian aggression. Even the most moderate of Abkhazians have now understood that Abkhazia needs to be separate from Georgia if it wants to survive as a nation. The general mood in Abkhazia was that of compassion with the brotherly people of South Ossetia.

RAD: Do you think that the reaction from Washington (Russia is trying to reestablish its empire, Russia is sending a message to its neighbors not to join NATO) is justified? Does Russia have a "hidden agenda" and was it, in your view, not only about South Ossetia, but about larger geopolitical goals?

Chirikba: The USA, and some other countries, like Israel, Turkey and Ukraine, bear a great share of responsibility for the current crisis. They were arming Georgia to the teeth, knowing perfectly well that their huge arms supplies and training efforts can and will be used by Georgia against the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – there was no other rationale for Georgia to spend so much effort on massive military preparations. Specifically, the USA and Israel, through their military, logistical and advisory assistance to Georgia can be regarded as participants in this conflict.

History plays a crucial role in the Caucasus, and Abkhazians regard their right to independence as historically justified. Abkhazia is an ancient country, as ancient as Georgia itself. It has its own history, specific language, which is unrelated to Georgian, and its own distinct culture, identity and political aspirations. The majority of Abkhazians are (Orthodox) Christians, though there are also Sunni Muslim Abkhazians. Abkhazia is a democratic country, it has a stable political regime, free media and a viable economy.

In the past, Abkhazia was a kingdom and a principality. In 1810 it came under the Russian protectorate, quite independently from the neighboring Georgian provinces of the time. With the Sovietization drive after the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, Abkhazia entered the USSR, again, independently from Georgia. Until 1931 Abkhazia enjoyed the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), on an equal footing with the Georgian SSR. The troubles started in 1931, when Abkhazia was included into Georgia as an Autonomous republic by Joseph Stalin against the will of its people. The ensuing years saw the repression of Abkhazian culture by Georgian rulers. The Abkhazian language was forbidden and children had to study in Georgian, which was unknown to them. The Abkhazian place-names were changed into Georgian ones, the majority of Abkhazian politicians and intellectuals were physically exterminated and tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians were moved from Georgia proper to Abkhazia with the aim of making Abkhazians an insignificant minority in their own homeland. Abkhazia had to become Georgia, and Abkhazians had to become Georgians.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Abkhazia proposed to establish federative relations with Georgia. But instead of negotiations on its political status, on 14 August 1992 Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze unexpectedly attacked Abkhazia militarily. During the war of 1992–1993 Georgians killed four percent of the entire Abkhazian population and destroyed the small republic's national archives, museums, monuments of culture, and socio-economic infrastructure. The commander of the Georgian forces in Abkhazia, Colonel G. Karkarashvili, in a televised address on the Abkhaz TV warned that he was ready to sacrifice the lives of 100,000 Georgians in order to exterminate the entire Abkhazian nation of 93,000. Georgy Khaindrava, the civilian administrator of territories of Abkhazia under Georgian occupation, stated in an interview with *Le Monde Diplomatique* in April 2003 that the Georgians were perfectly capable of destroying the genetic stock of the Abkhazian nation by killing 15,000 of their youths. For the small Abkhazian nation, all this was their "Holocaust," the attempt of a "final solution" of the Abkhazian problem.

Miraculously, David won over Goliath. In September 1993 Abkhazia won the brutal and devastating war with Georgia. Since that time it exists as an independent polity. The independent Georgian republic is thus 16 years old, and the independent Abkhazian republic is 15 years old.

By its genocidal policies in Abkhazia in 1931–1954 and 1992–1993, Georgia lost any moral and legal right to rule Abkhazia and to exploit its natural riches. Abkhazia will never again be a part of the Georgian state.

As to the current crisis, from a broader perspective, what at first appeared to be a local conflict in South Ossetia caused truly tectonic changes in the world's geopolitical configurations. The mono-polar world as we knew it since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is over, and now we have an entirely different situation, with three major global centers of power – USA, Russia and China. This is the geopolitical map of the 21st century, and Washington, embittered as it is, has to comply with this new reality.

RAD: What is Russia's plan now vis-à-vis Abkhazia/South Ossetia/Georgia? How can Russia help to establish permanent peace? Can it play a constructive role after what happened? Can Georgians and Abkhaz/South Ossetians still live together as good neighbors after what happened?

Chirikba: On August 26, 2008 the Republic of Abkhazia was officially recognized by the Russian Federation. By recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia surgically cut off the major problem for Georgia – the territorial one. Paradoxically as it might seem, this will bring the long-awaited stability to the region. Free of its disputed territories, which it was never able to re-conquer and control, Georgia can concentrate on its own internal problems, of which it has quite enough. Besides, Georgia still has areas compactly populated by ethnically and linguistically diverse minorities – Megrelians, Svans, Azeris and Armenians. The lessons of Abkhazia and South Ossetia should teach any government in Tbilisi that the problem of minorities represents a crucial political issue for such a multi-ethnic country as Georgia.

When/if Georgia comes to its senses and recognizes both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent nations, these three can, no doubt, build up their relations on a new basis, that of equality and cooperation, which will be beneficial for all sides. But this will take time.

RAD: Do you think it is still realistic to think that Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be reintegrated into a Georgian state? If not, what would be your solution?

Chirikba: It is utterly unrealistic to believe that Abkhazia and South Ossetia, after years of bloodshed between them and Georgia, would want to reintegrate into the latter. Now, after the latest Georgian aggression, the last hopes for this have died. Abkhazia and South Ossetia will never again be a part of the country which wants to destroy them as nations. It is better for the Georgians and for the rest of the world to understand, at last, this reality. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are distinct and separate nations, and they will remain like this.

RAD: What should Europe and the US do? What would you recommend Russian politicians to do? What would you recommend Georgian politicians do?

Chirikba: Europe, the US and Georgia alike should understand that it is not possible to get Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into Georgia. They should respect the right of these two small freedom-loving nations to self-determination and build their relations with them accordingly. The independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will bring about peace and stability in the Southern Caucasus. As much as in the Balkans, self-determination seems to be the only viable solution left to these protracted and deadlocked conflicts. Only those who want to perpetuate the situation of no war, no peace forever, would insist on the preservation of the *status quo* or on the restoration of the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. But this will never work, as it is not possible to turn back time.

RAD: What will happen next, after Russia's recognition of the two regions' independence? Will they join Russia or seek to be countries on their own? How will they survive?

Chirikba: It is of utmost importance for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and for Russia as well, that other countries follow suit and recognize the independence of the two formerly *de facto* states. I think that there is a good chance that we will see such recognitions rather soon.

But the current extremely hostile reaction to this process on the part of the US, European Union, G7 and OSCE seems to be quite irrational. Are these not the very same countries which only recently recognized the forced separation of Kosovo from Serbia and recognized it as an independent state against the will of the Serbian government, having thus drawn new lines in Europe? Why are the South Ossetians and Abkhazians, who are trying to escape from the Georgian bully and who already have viable statehoods for more than 15 years, denied the same right to recognition as was allowed for Kosovo Albanians? Only because they are perceived as pro-Russian, and the Albanians (and Georgians, for that matter) as pro-Western? Unfortunately, what we see in this angry reaction is the application of the policy of double standards and attempts to use these morally dubious principles against the historical choice of the nations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Principles should not be conditioned by political considerations, and the right to freedom from oppression is indivisible.

Abkhazia will remain a separate independent state, and it does not plan to become a part of any other state. It is determined to prove to the world that it can be a responsible member of the international community, which is governed by the rule of law, and which supports democracy, civic liberties and rights, free media and respect for minorities. The natural beauty of Abkhazia, its mild subtropical climate, warm Black Sea and excellent beaches will soon turn this country into a popular tourist destination for many in the West and the East alike, bringing about economic prosperity. The world must give the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia a chance to lead the peaceful and dignified life they deserve!

Questions and Answers

Interview with Archil Gegeshidze, Senior Fellow at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) in Tbilisi

Russian Analytical Digest: Why has the situation around the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia turned from bad to worse in recent months?

Archil Gegeshidze: The “colored revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, respectively, and the NATO and EU expansions to the east in 2004, by which the West moved to Russia’s borders when it included the Baltic States, signaled to the Kremlin that the existing *status quo* in which Russia had retained influence on the post-Soviet domain was no longer sustainable. Indeed, Georgia began to make strides toward NATO integration and, at the same time, attempted to “unfreeze” the long dormant conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by changing the Russia-dominated negotiation and peacekeeping formats. An agitated Russia resorted to regime change tactics by financing proxy political forces in Georgia and imposing an economic embargo (2006) in the hope of stimulating social insurgency. As these policies failed, the Kremlin may have decided to entrap Georgia in a major military provocation in the Russia-backed breakaway regions of Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia. Russia put this plan into operation following the West’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence and the NATO Bucharest Summit (February–April 2008). The plan included: unilaterally – in fact illegally – withdrawing from a CIS economic and arms embargo imposed in 1996 on Abkhazia; increasing troop strength and introducing paratroopers into Abkhazia; illegally moving heavy weaponry and offensive forces into Abkhazia; deploying the railroad troops to prepare rails for invasion; building an illegal military base near Tskhinvali (South Ossetia); undertaking large-scale military exercises near South Ossetia and Abkhazia; and failing to redeploy the troops.

Separatist governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in coordination with Russia, had been systematically rejecting peace initiatives either proposed by Tbilisi or brokered by impartial third parties. The last one was a German-mediated peace plan for Abkhazia. In the meantime, the separatists in both regions willingly yielded to Russia and either disengaged from political dialogue with Tbilisi (as was the case with Abkhazia) or insisted on keeping outdated negotiation formats (South Ossetia). At the same time, Russia was allowed to continue its military build-up in these breakaway regions.

The Georgian government failed to develop a proper vision to resolve the conflict. The primary deficiency of Georgia’s approach has been its inconsistency and wrong assumptions. Instead of establishing direct dialogue with the separatists, the Georgian government sought direct and indirect ways of coercion. Rather than identifying measures for step-by-

step *rapprochement*, Georgia's peace proposals were heedlessly packed with status agreements, which gave the separatists cause for refusing to discuss them. As the Russian military continued its build-up in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the separatists increasingly refused to engage in dialogue, hardliners gradually prevailed in the Georgian government. Having advocated a quick military modernization, these hardliners wrongly assumed that Georgia was ready to solve the conflicts by using force at an opportune moment or whenever provoked.

On the eve of the NATO Bucharest Summit, Germany announced that it "opposes Georgia's Membership Action Plan (MAP) application because of problems surrounding the country's two disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia." France too made public its doubt on this matter stating: "we oppose the entry of Georgia and Ukraine [into NATO] because it is not the right response to the balance of power in Europe and between Europe and Russia, and we want to have a dialogue on this subject with Russia." (Both quotes from: Civil Georgia, civil.ge, 1 April 2008). Both statements were dangerous since Russia took them as a green light to further erode the situation on the ground in order to prevent Georgia from becoming eligible for MAP at the planned NATO Ministerial this December. In the wake of the Summit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that Moscow would spare no efforts to prevent membership in the alliance. General Yuri Baluevskii, the chief of staff of the Russian armed forces, echoed him, saying that Russia would protect its interests through military and "other measures" if Georgia and Ukraine joined NATO (Baluevskii quoted in: Civil Georgia, 11 April 2008).

RAD: Why has Georgia decided to intervene militarily in South Ossetia? Do you think Georgia was right to intervene in South Ossetia?

Gegeshidze: The Georgian government argues that its forces advanced into the Tskhinvali region only after days of intensive shelling that caused civilian deaths in villages under Georgian control —and after confirmation that a massive Russian land force had begun invading Georgia (for more information, see the "Timeline of Russian Aggression in Georgia" link in "Recommended Reading" below). Russia disagrees and claims that its forces entered Georgian territory only after a purported "surprise Georgian assault" on Tskhinvali. However, Moscow continues to refuse to make public the time at which Russia launched its invasion into Georgia. Nonetheless, by most accounts, Russia's invasion was a premeditated act. Obviously, unless an impartial analysis of the chronology of events before and after the escalation of hostilities is made, it would be difficult to judge fairly. Notably, the Georgian government on 29 August 2008 called for an independent panel to carry out such an investigation.

RAD: Do you think that Russia was right to react the way it did?

Gegeshidze: The extent of willingness to employ crude military force clearly indicates that Russia's action was disproportionate. The Russian attack immediately broadened from the conflict zone of South Ossetia to include the opening of a second front in Abkhazia and systematic attacks on military and economic infrastructure across Georgia's territory. Also, reputable international organizations have established as fact that the Russian military used internationally-banned cluster munitions and SS-26 missiles against civilian populations multiple times. Additionally, it goes beyond the logic of a military campaign to intentionally set forest fires by means of purposeful bombardment unless you harbor a deep grudge and anger against the country and its people. As of this moment, almost 1,000 hectares of precious, old-growth woodlands have been burnt down.

RAD: Was the Russian decision to move into South Ossetia justified?

Gegeshidze: The main premise of the Russian argument to move into Georgia — that Russia acted fully within its rights in defending its citizens in South Ossetia — is completely wrong. Russia, the argument goes, had to resort to the use of force to fulfill its constitutional responsibility to protect its citizens who faced the threat of genocide. In an attempt to claim international legitimacy and the moral high ground, Russian leaders described the military operation against Georgia interchangeably as either a "peace enforcement operation" or "a humanitarian intervention."

Let me quote from an article by Natalie Wild ("Does a State Have the Right to Protect Its Citizens Abroad?") which appeared in Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty on 22 August 2008: "For such intervention to be legitimate, however, certain conditions need to be met. These include the existence of undisputed evidence of crimes committed against the civilian population; international authorization for the use of multilateral force; the objective must be limited to preventing human suffering and protecting the population; and the use of force should not exceed that required to achieve the humanitarian objective. Even at the risk of delaying an adequate response to a humanitarian catastrophe,

these conditions need to be met in order to avoid the possible abuse of the precedent with damaging consequences for both the principle of intervention and its practical application.”

Interestingly, while Russia claimed to intervene on the basis of humanitarian concerns, its forces subsequently permitted or endorsed the systematic ethnic cleansing of Georgians from South Ossetia. UN Satellite images provide graphic evidence of this (*see Recommended Reading for a link*).

RAD: How have the Georgians reacted to Georgia’s intervention in South Ossetia? Did they support Saakashvili’s decision?

Gegeshidze: From the beginning, Georgians were perplexed. Although generally expected, the war came as a surprise. The pre-conflict propaganda war makes it difficult to understand what was actually happening. In the course of events, however, as Russia’s intervention resulted in casualties, territorial losses and ruined infrastructure, public opinion became ambivalent. On one hand, there is a sense that Georgia was entrapped in an unnecessary provocation and therefore the people need to rally round Saakashvili and support his leadership in resisting Russia’s aggression. On the other hand, many question whether this provocation could have been avoided and whether moving troops into Tskhinvali was the only option. Meantime, by common consent, these questions will not be asked until Russia withdraws from the occupied chunks of Georgian territory.

RAD: Do you think that the reaction from Washington (Russia is trying to reestablish its empire, Russia is sending a message to its neighbors not to join NATO) is justified? Does Russia have a "hidden agenda" and was it, in your view, not only about South Ossetia, but about larger geopolitical goals?

Gegeshidze: As soon as Russia extended its area of activities far beyond the zone of conflict and attacked both military and civilian targets in Georgia proper, the Kremlin’s larger imperial designs were laid bare. As Brzezinski put it in an article in *The Huffington Post* on 30 August 2008, Russia intends “to reintegrate the former Soviet space under the Kremlin’s control and to cut Western access to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia by gaining control over the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline that runs through Georgia.” Russia’s invasion also was not a response to the situation in South Ossetia, but a move to punish Georgia for its pro-Western foreign policy, as also argued by other Western scholars (*see Recommended Reading*). An intended by-product of this punishment was meant to be intimidation of governments in the post-Soviet neighborhood that are potentially disloyal to the Kremlin. Additionally, Russian aggression challenges the entire European security architecture as it has developed since the 1990s. The Kremlin masters may have been thinking that the time has come to take revenge upon the West for all the “humiliation” Russia has suffered since then: three rounds of NATO expansion, the war in Iraq, developments in Kosovo in 1999 and 2008, etc. should not remain unpunished. Vladimir Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference served as a bellwether.

RAD: Do you think it will be possible for Georgia to have normal relations with Russia again in the future?

Gegeshidze: Not in the foreseeable future. However, Europe’s history demonstrates that nations once at war can live in peace. France and Germany as well as Russia and Finland are cases in point. In Georgia’s case, despite the public’s great indignation at Russia’s aggression, there are no russophobic sentiments. As time passes and Russia changes, the two countries will coexist in peace, if not in friendship.

RAD: Do you think it is still realistic to think that Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be reintegrated into a Georgian state? If not, what would be your solution?

Gegeshidze: Obviously, in the foreseeable future, reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into a Georgian state is improbable. On one hand, the recent war and, on the other, Russia’s unilateral recognition of the breakaway regions have postponed this prospect for a long time. Hardliners were taught a bitter lesson: these conflicts do not have a military solution. Only voluntary reconciliation may bring, if ever, Georgians and the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia together. Unfortunately, however, recent developments have moved this objective beyond reach. The situation is further complicated by the ever escalating confrontation between Russia and the West. Georgia and the breakaway regions may find themselves on opposing sides of new dividing lines. Nonetheless, modern history provides examples that show that despite long decades of alienation, peoples may renegotiate arrangements of coexistence in a common state. Cyprus is a case in point. If and when Georgia becomes a truly democratic state, disenchanting Abkhazia and

South Ossetia, unless already annexed by Russia, may want to review their strategic course of development and join Georgia in its Europeanization aspirations to march together toward joint EU-modeled solutions.

RAD: What should Europe and the US do?

Gegeshidze: I would recommend them to do several things:

- Reach a higher degree of coordination in their policy vis-à-vis the crisis in Georgia and with regard to Russia.
- Compel Russia to immediately withdraw from what Moscow refers to as “buffer zones.”
- Compel Russia to adhere to other points of the Sarkozy-Medvedev-Saakashvili “cease-fire agreement.”
- De-legitimize Russia’s “passportization” strategy; deprive Moscow of the right of “humanitarian intervention.”
- Make Russia pay a high political/economic cost for its aggressive acts against Georgia through tangible actions.
- Extend MAP to Georgia so that Moscow understands its mistaken calculations.
- Offer Georgia tangible incentives within the EU Neighborhood Policy.
- Provide Georgia with alternative security guarantees until it accedes to NATO.
- Design a substantial reconstruction aid package for Georgia.

RAD: What would you recommend Russian politicians to do?

Gegeshidze: “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail” (Abraham Maslow).

RAD: What would you recommend Georgian politicians do?

Gegeshidze:

- Raise the efficiency of humanitarian assistance to displaced persons and ensure provision of shelter before winter.
- Ensure the sustainability of the economy and the stability of the financial system.
- Press for an internationalization of the conflicts and the deployment of multinational police forces.
- Improve the country’s democratic credentials to sustain mobilization of Western support.

Recommended Reading

- UN Satellite data from South Ossetia – <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/08/28/georgi19712.htm>
- Georgian Government, “Timeline of Russian Aggression in Georgia,” 25 August 2008, Tbilisi, http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6625&Itemid=65.
- Svante E. Cornell, Johanna Popjanevski, and Niklas Nilsson, “Russia’s War in Georgia: Causes and Implications for Georgia and the World,” CACI, Silk Road Studies Program, Policy Paper, August 2008, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/0808Georgia-PP.pdf>.

Documentation

The Russian-Georgian Conflict. Chronicle of Military Events, August 2008

| | | |
|--------------|---------------|--|
| 01 Aug. 2008 | South Ossetia | According to the South Ossetian government, six men were shot dead in Georgia's bombardment of South Ossetia. The Georgian government accused South Ossetia of initiating the fight. |
| 05 Aug. 2008 | South Ossetia | Exchanges of fire between South Ossetia's Khetagurovo and Georgia's Avnevi involving small arms, grenade launchers, mortars and armored personnel carriers. Fighting between the villages of Ubiat and Khetagurovo, in South Ossetia, and Avnevi and Nuli, in Georgia. The combatants used firearms of different calibers and grenade launchers. Georgian troops fired on the South Ossetian villages Sarabuki and Dmensi, as well as a Russian peacekeeping force control point. South Ossetia used mortars and heavy caliber firearms in response. |
| 06 Aug. 2008 | South Ossetia | Firearms exchanges between the combatants on the south and south eastern outskirts of Tskhinvali. On the night of 6/7 August the Russian peacekeeping forces identified eight aircraft heading from Georgia to South Ossetia. Five of the planes were reported to be Georgian SU-25 ground attack airplanes. |
| 07 Aug. 2008 | South Ossetia | Referring to an order of its military command, the group of Georgian military observers left the headquarters of the joint Russian-Georgian peacekeeping forces and all control points where Georgian military observers should be stationed according to the existing agreements between the countries. From its territory, Georgia fired heavy shells on the South Ossetian village of Khetagurovo. |
| 08 Aug. 2008 | Georgia | Georgia officially informed the Russian peacekeeping forces that it was launching military actions in South Ossetia. Mikheil Saakashvili ordered a full mobilization in Georgia. |
| | South Ossetia | Georgian troops started bombarding Tskhinvali. Five Georgian SU-25 planes attacked the town of Tkverneti. The fighting continued throughout the day with exchanges of fire and shelling lasting until late in the night. |
| | Abkhazia | Abkhazia sent 1,000 volunteers to South Ossetia. |
| 09 Aug. 2008 | Georgia | Georgia declared martial law. Russian military planes bombarded the Georgian port Poti and its military base in Senaki. According to the press office of the Russian land forces, Russian troops opened fire on Georgian troops in Georgia. The Russian air force bombarded the military airport Kopitnari in the town of Kutaisi. The civil population was reportedly evacuated. Reuters reported, citing a Georgian source, that 129 Georgian soldiers and officers were killed and 748 injured. The Russian air force bombed the town of Poti. |
| | South Ossetia | According to the South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity, 1,400 people were killed in Tskhinvali. The press office of the Russian land forces reported 12 members of the Russian peacekeeping forces killed and 50 injured. The Russian 76 th Airborne Division from Pskov landed in Tskhinvali. The Georgian troops were completely pushed out of the town. |
| | Abkhazia | Georgia drew its armed forces to the border with Abkhazia. Abkhazia started a military operation against Georgia in the upper end of the Kodori Gorge. |

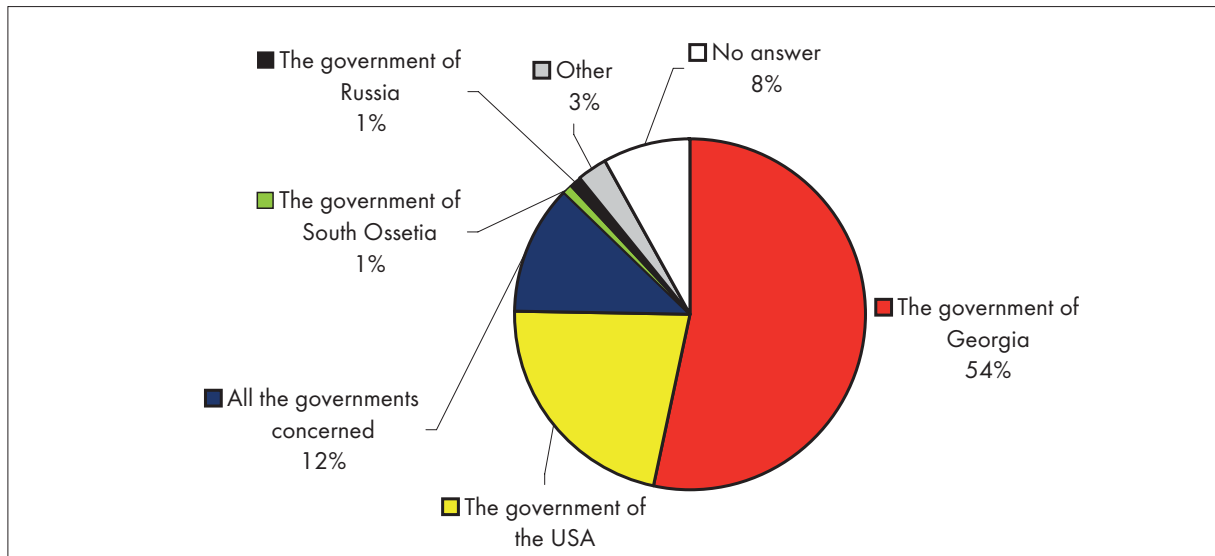
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|--------------|----------------------------|--|
| 10 Aug. 2008 | Georgia | <p>The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs declared that Georgia had begun pulling its troops out of South Ossetia.</p> <p>The Russian air force bombed the Georgian aircraft factory Tbilaviastroi and the town of Zugdidi.</p> <p>Georgia agreed to let the Russian peacekeeping forces into the region of Zugdidi if Russia agreed to stop bombing Georgia.</p> <p>The Black Sea Fleet flagship, the guided missile cruiser Moskva, and the escort vessel Smetlivy reached the maritime boundary to Georgia.</p> <p>The Russian ships sank a Georgian missile boat.</p> |
| | South Ossetia | <p>The Russian peacekeeping forces gained full control of Tskhinvali.</p> <p>2,000 inhabitants of Tskhinvali were evacuated.</p> |
| | Abkhazia | <p>The Russian air force bombed the Georgian part of the Kodori Gorge.</p> |
| 11 Aug. 2008 | Georgia | <p>The Russian air force bombed the outskirts of Tbilisi.</p> <p>Russian troops began an artillery bombardment of Gori and then captured it, according to Kakha Lomaia, the Secretary of the Georgian National Security Council.</p> |
| | South Ossetia | <p>Georgia renewed the bombardment of South Ossetia.</p> <p>The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Ossetia reported that Georgian military forces blew up the Kekhvi canal in Tskhinvali, flooding cellars.</p> <p>6 Georgian military helicopters attacked targets near Tskhinvali.</p> |
| | Abkhazia | <p>Russian troopers arrived in Abkhazia.</p> |
| 12 Aug. 2008 | Georgia | <p>Georgia and Russia agreed to the peace plan proposed by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, which stipulated declaring a ceasefire, providing medical aid to the injured and removing the Russian troops from the conflict area.</p> <p>The Russian military forces entered Georgia's port of Poti.</p> |
| | South Ossetia | <p>Curfew imposed in Tskhinvali.</p> <p>Dmitry Medvedev said the peace enforcement operation in South Ossetia was over and ordered the Russian armed forces to eliminate the sources of military resistance in the conflict area.</p> |
| | Abkhazia | <p>Abkhazia began a military operation to force the Georgian military forces out of the Kodori Gorge.</p> |
| 13 Aug. 2008 | Georgia | <p>Mikheil Saakashvili agreed to the six-point peace plan proposed by Nicolas Sarkozy but said that some points should be further specified.</p> |
| 14 Aug. 2008 | South Ossetia and Abkhazia | <p>Abkhazia and South Ossetia accepted the cease-fire agreement.</p> <p>The South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity and the Abkhazian President Sergei Bagapsh signed the peace plan proposed by the European Union.</p> <p>Dmitry Medvedev promised that Russia would accept and support any decision of Abkhazian and South Ossetian people on their status.</p> |
| 15 Aug. 2008 | Georgia and Russia | <p>Mikheil Saakashvili signed the six-point peace deal brokered by Nicolas Sarkozy.</p> |
| 16 Aug. 2008 | Georgia and Russia | <p>The Russian President Dmitry Medvedev also signed the peace plan.</p> |
| 22 Aug. 2008 | Georgia and Russia | <p>According to Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, the Russian troops had been completely withdrawn from Georgia. But Georgia and the West claimed that some Russian troops still remained on Georgian territory.</p> |
| 26 Aug. 2008 | Georgia and Russia | <p>Russian President Dmitry Medvedev officially recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independence.</p> <p>Georgia, the USA and the European countries condemned Russia's decision.</p> |

Opinion Polls

Russian Public Opinion on the Conflict

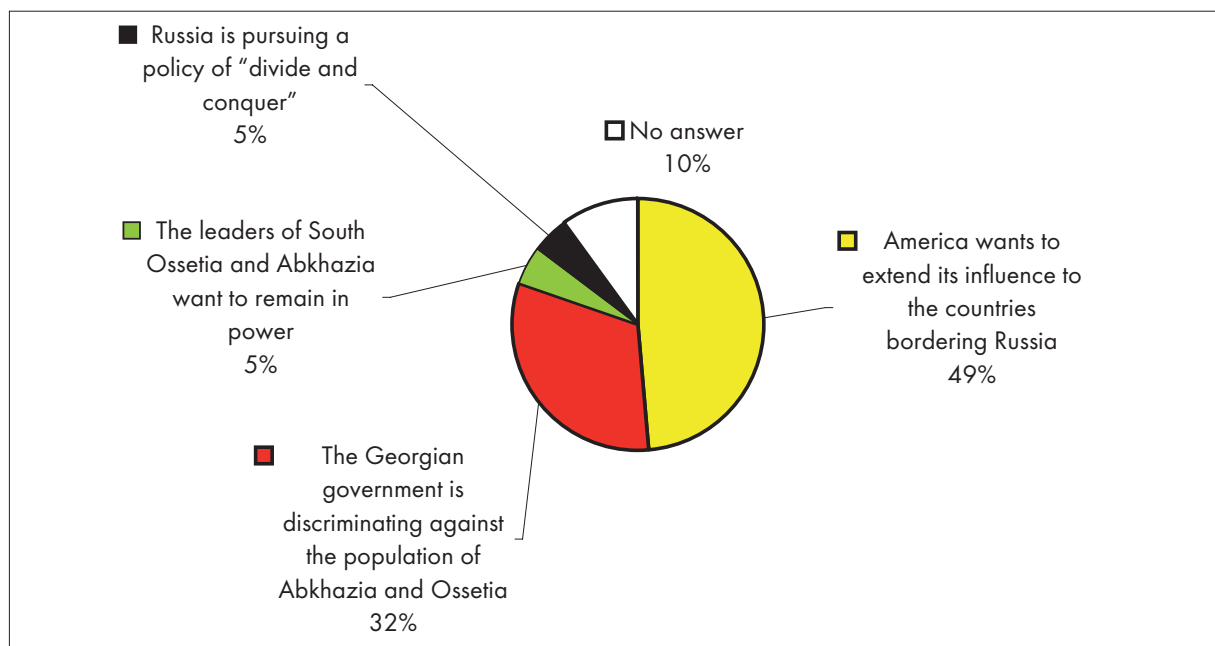
1. Who is Guilty?

Graph 1: In Your Opinion, Who Initiated the Conflict in South Ossetia?



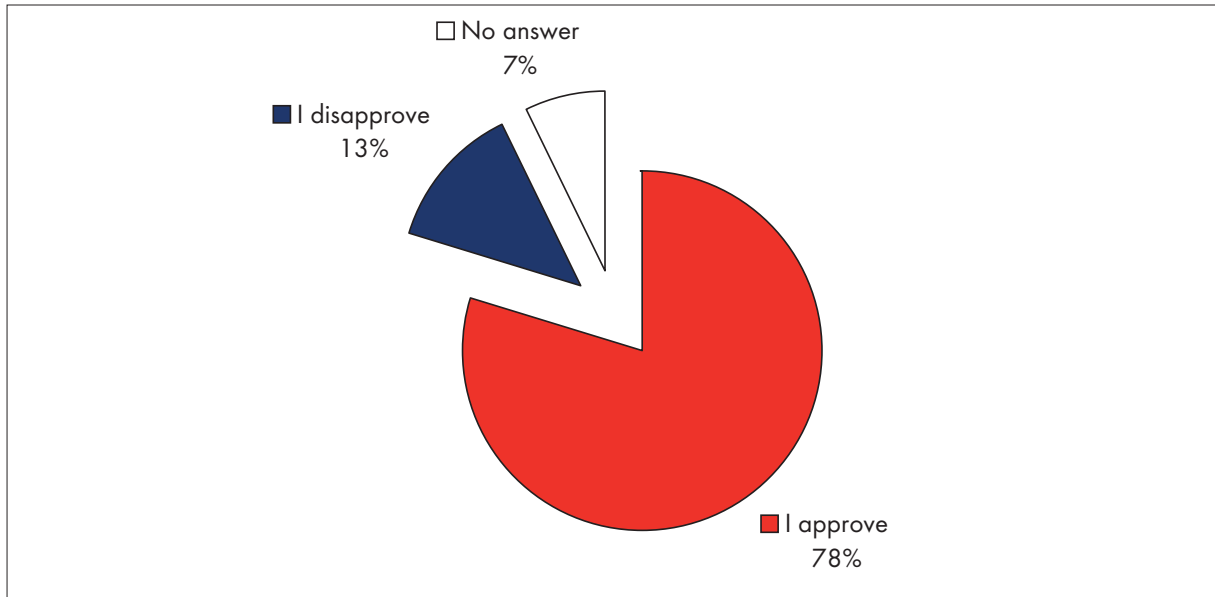
Source: Survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center VTsIOM, August 10–13, 2008
<http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/10500.html>

Graph 2: In Your Opinion, What Was the Main Trigger for the Conflict in South Ossetia?



Source: Survey conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center, August 15–18, 2008
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2008082100.html>

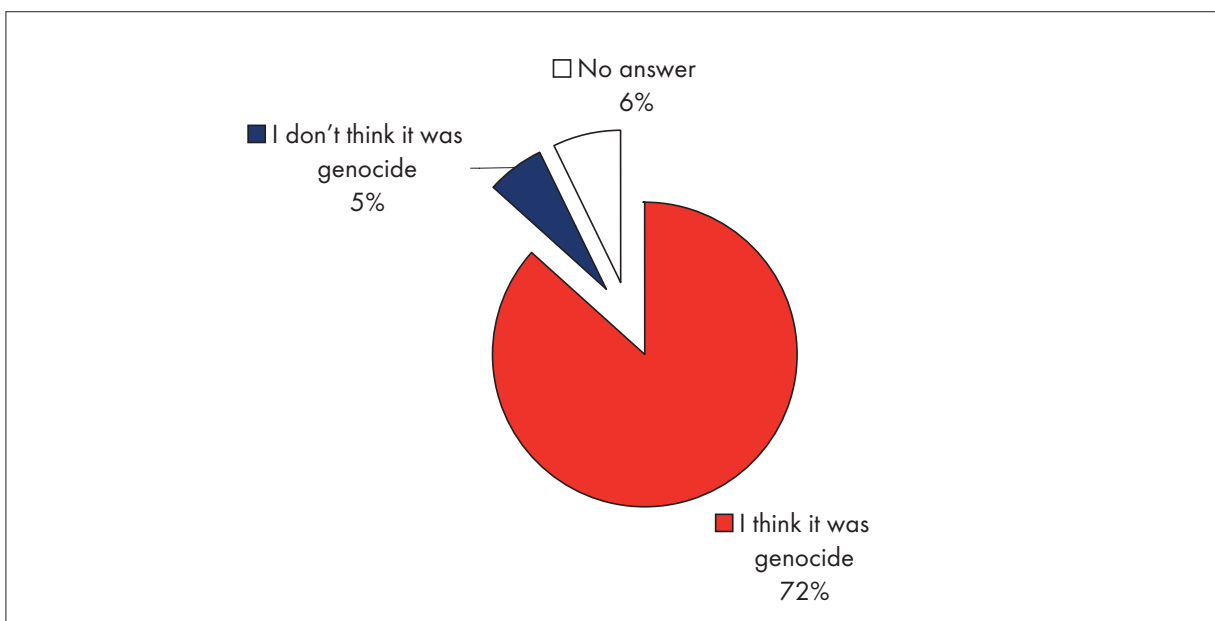
Graph 3: Do You Approve or Disapprove of the Decision of the Russian Leadership to Send Troops to South Ossetia to Conduct a Military Operation?



Note: Only those who were informed about the events in South Ossetia (98% of all respondents) were asked this question.

Source: Survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 10–11, 2008 <http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/osetia01>

Graph 4: After the Attack on Tskhinvali by the Georgian Army, Many Accused Georgia of Genocide. Do You Think that the Actions of the Georgian Army Can Be Described as Genocide?

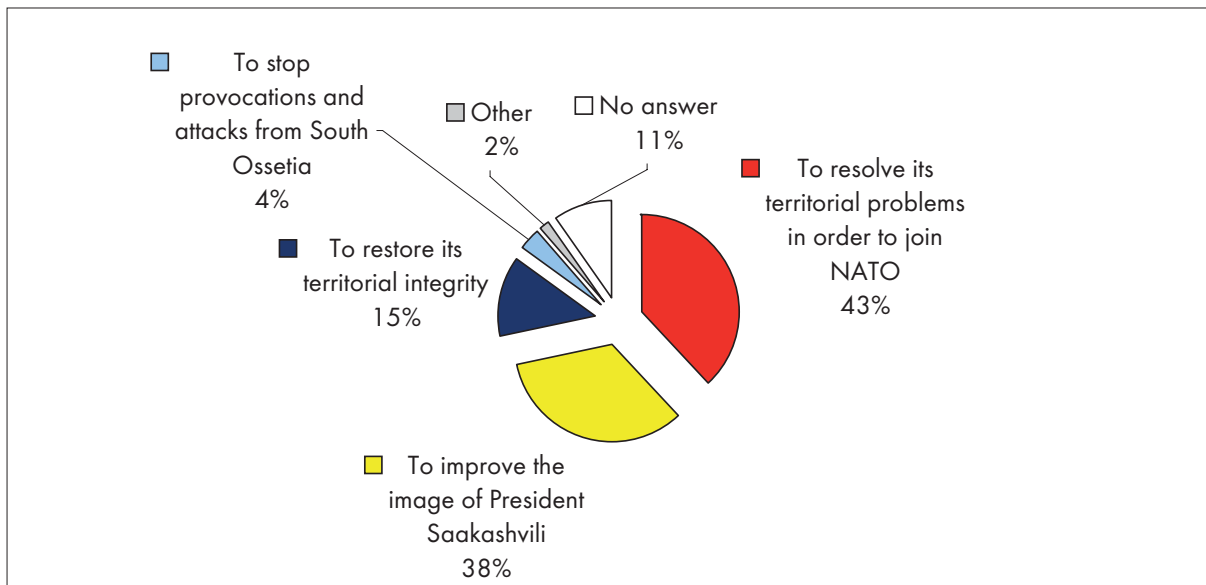


Note: Only those who were informed about the military operation in Tskhinvali and knew the word “genocide” (83% of all the respondents) were asked this question.

Source: Survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 16–17, 2008 <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/dominant/dom0833/d083321>

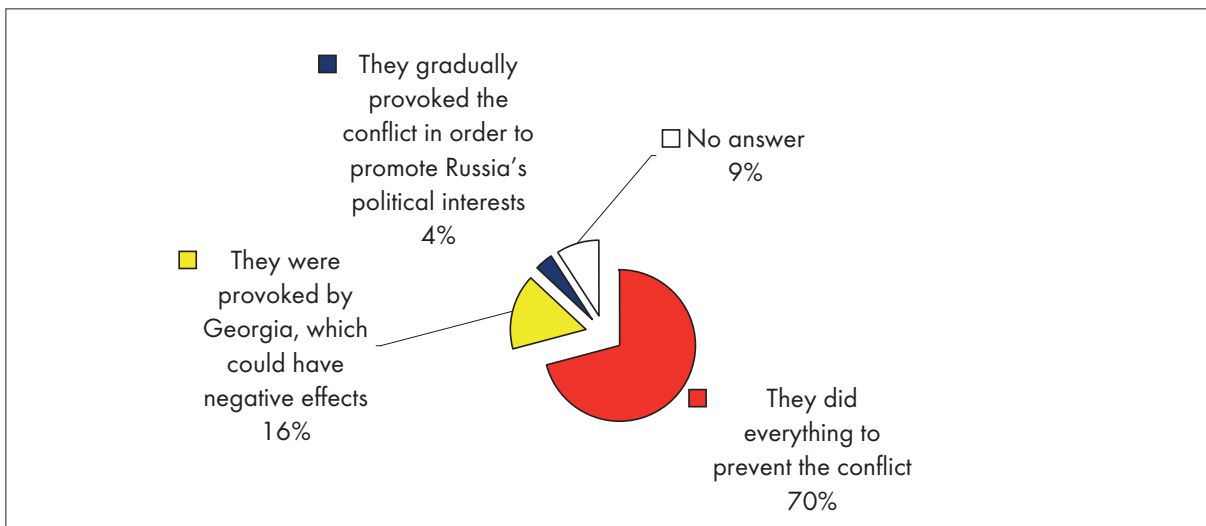
2. Motives of the Conflicting Parties

Graph 5: In Your Opinion, Why Did Georgia Resort to Military Action Against South Ossetia?



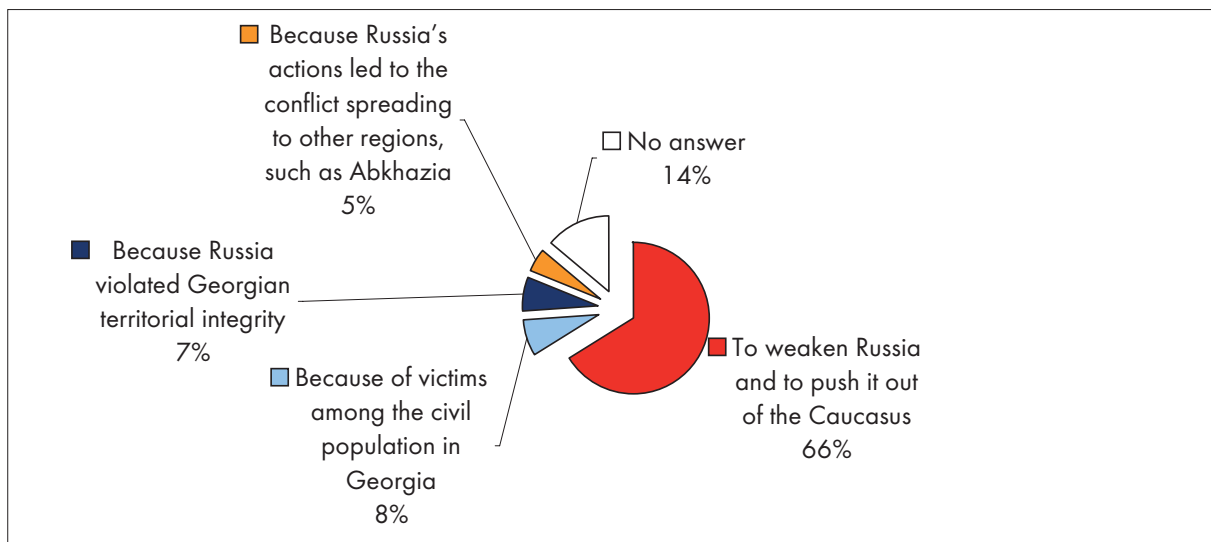
Source: Survey conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center, August 15–18, 2008
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2008082100.html>

Graph 6: How Would You Assess the Actions of the Russian Leaders in the Conflict Between Georgia and South Ossetia?



Source: Survey conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center, August 15–18, 2008
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2008082100.html>

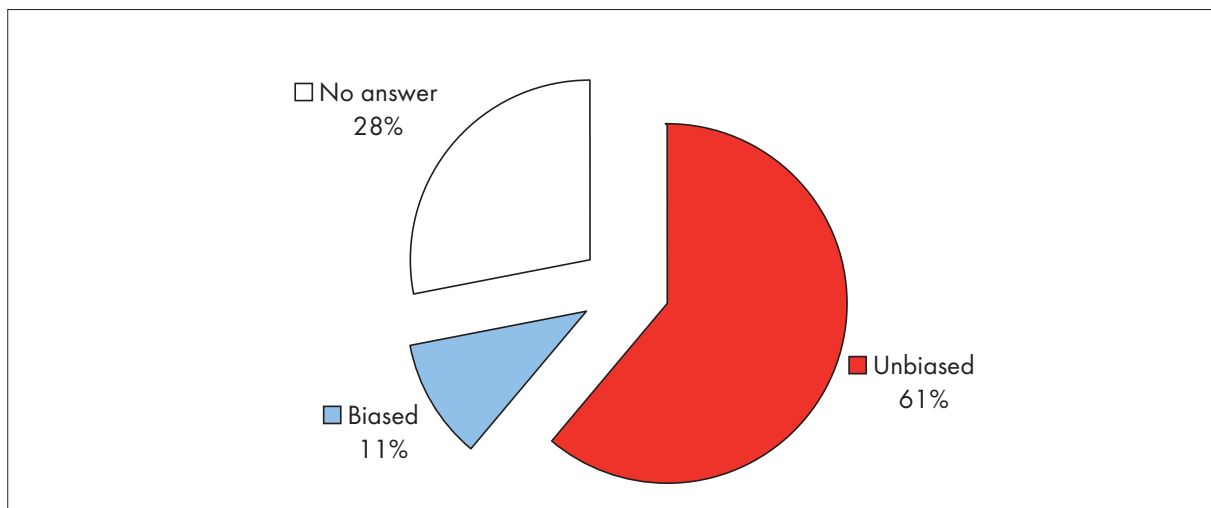
Graph 7: In Your Opinion, Why Do the Leaders of the Western Countries Support Georgia in the South Ossetian Conflict?



Source: Survey conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center, August 15–18, 2008
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2008082100.html>

3. Media Coverage

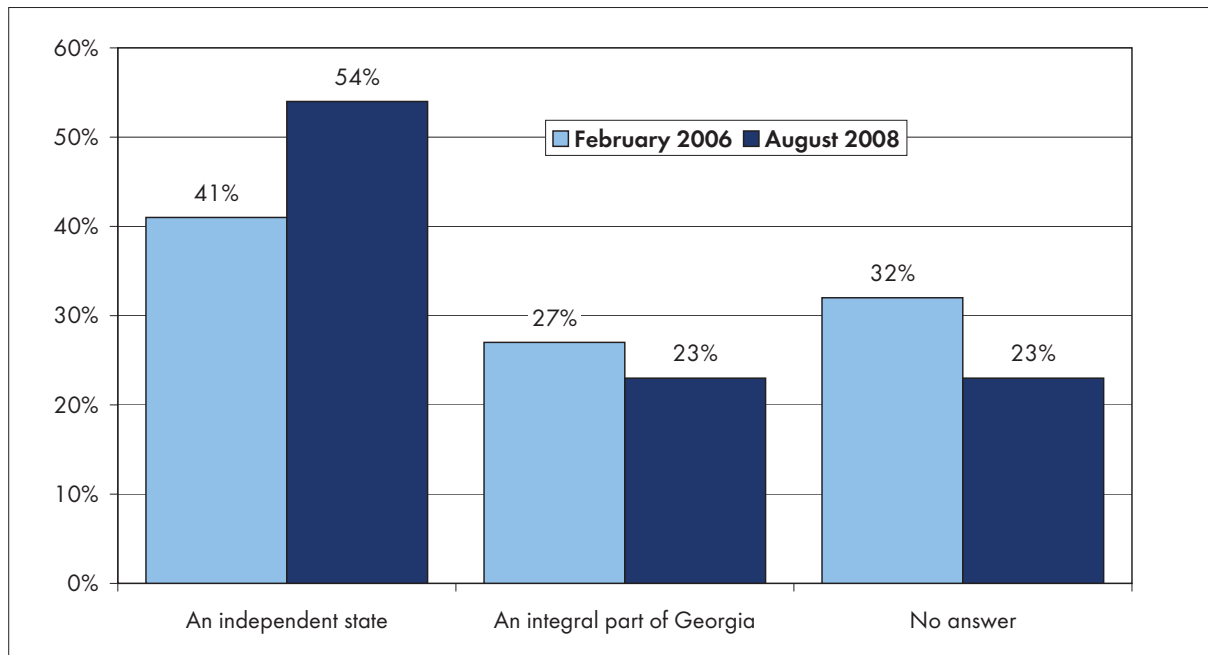
Graph 8: In Your Opinion, Was the Media Coverage of the Georgian Conflict in Russia Biased or Unbiased?



Source: Survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 16–17, 2008
<http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/dominant/dom0833/d083321>

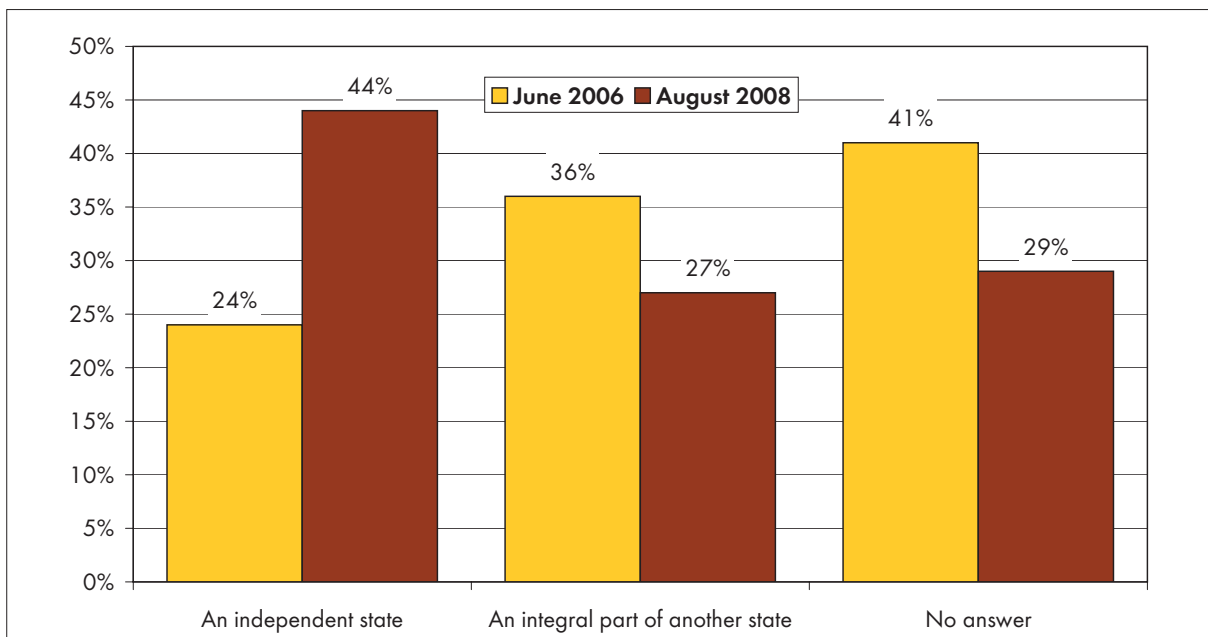
4. The Status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

Graph 9: In Your Opinion, Is South Ossetia Today an Integral Part of Georgia or an Independent State? (2006 vs. 2008)



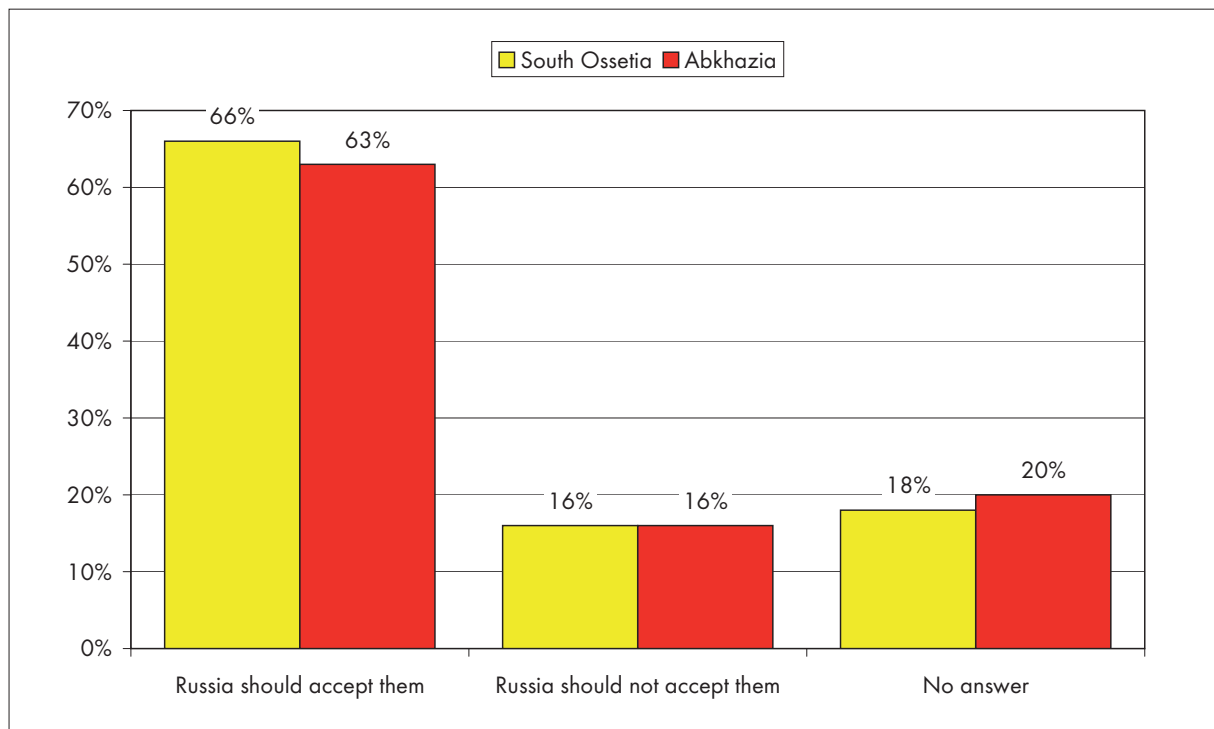
Source: Survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 16–17, 2008
<http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/dominant/dom0833/d083321>

Graph 10: In Your Opinion, Is Abkhazia Now an Independent State or an Integral Part of Another State? (2006 vs. 2008)



Source: Survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 16–17, 2008
<http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/dominant/dom0833/d083321>

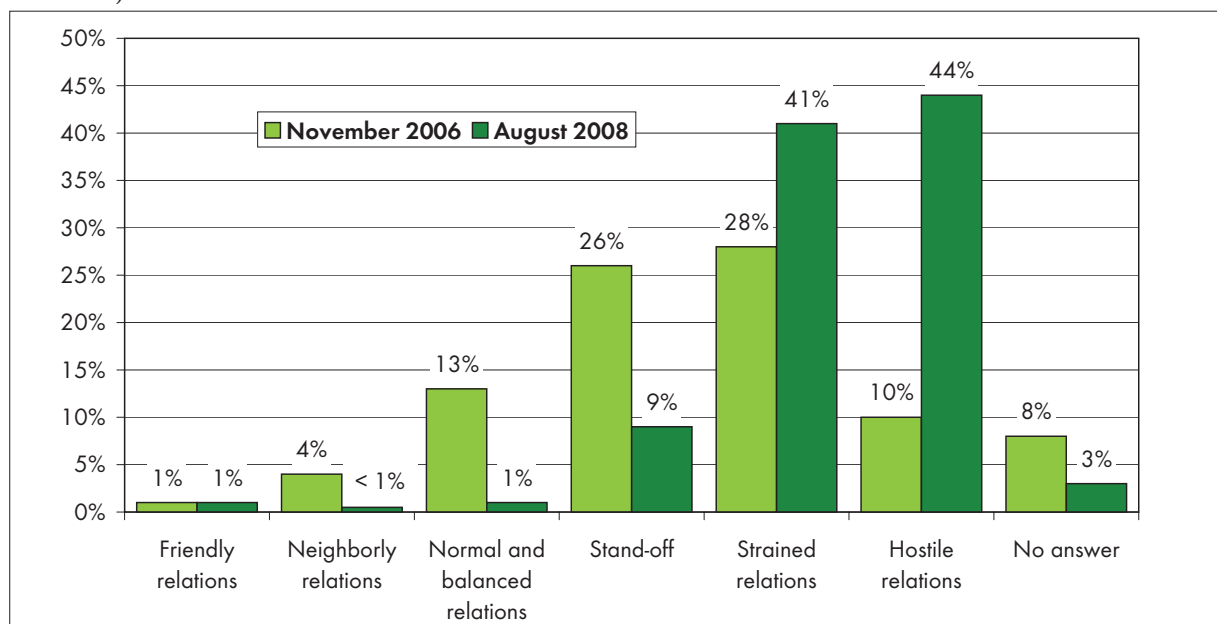
Graph 11: If South Ossetia and Abkhazia Officially Apply to Join the Russian Federation, Should Russia Accept Them?



Source: Survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 16–17, 2008
<http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/dominant/dom0833/d083321>

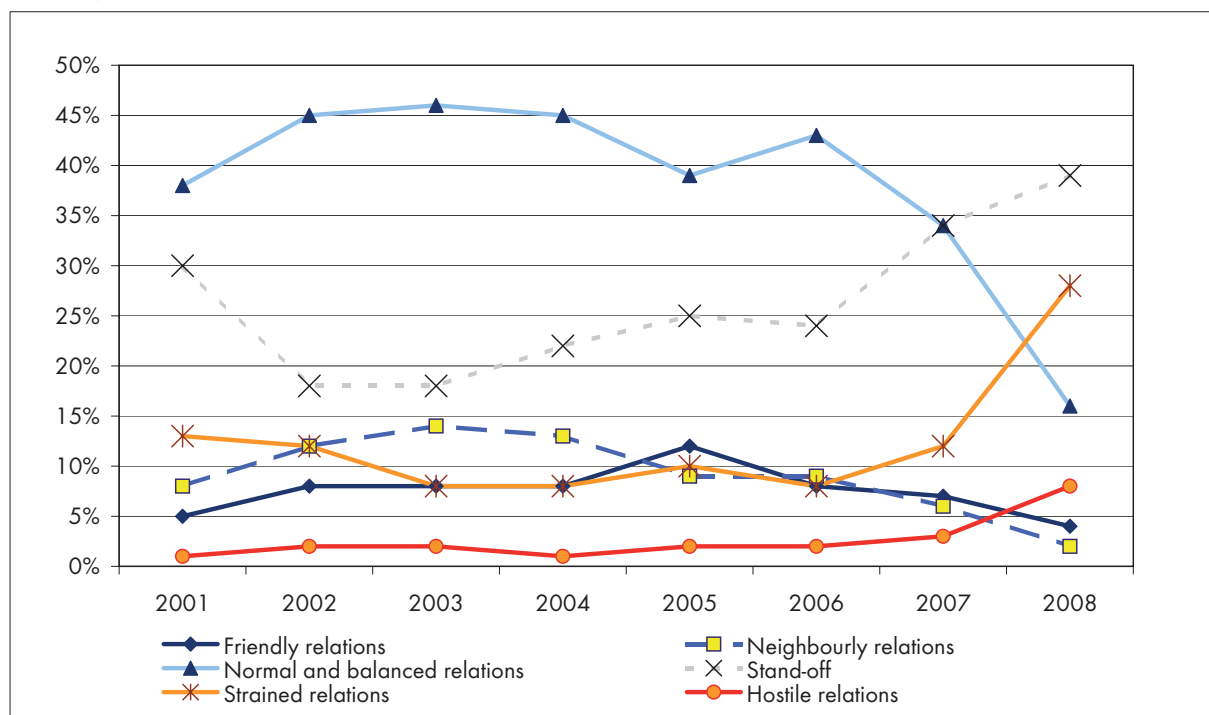
5. Relations between and Attitude to the Conflict Parties

Graph 12: How Would You Describe the Present Relations between Russia and Georgia? (2006 vs. 2008)



Source: Survey conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center, August 15–18, 2008
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2008082103.html>

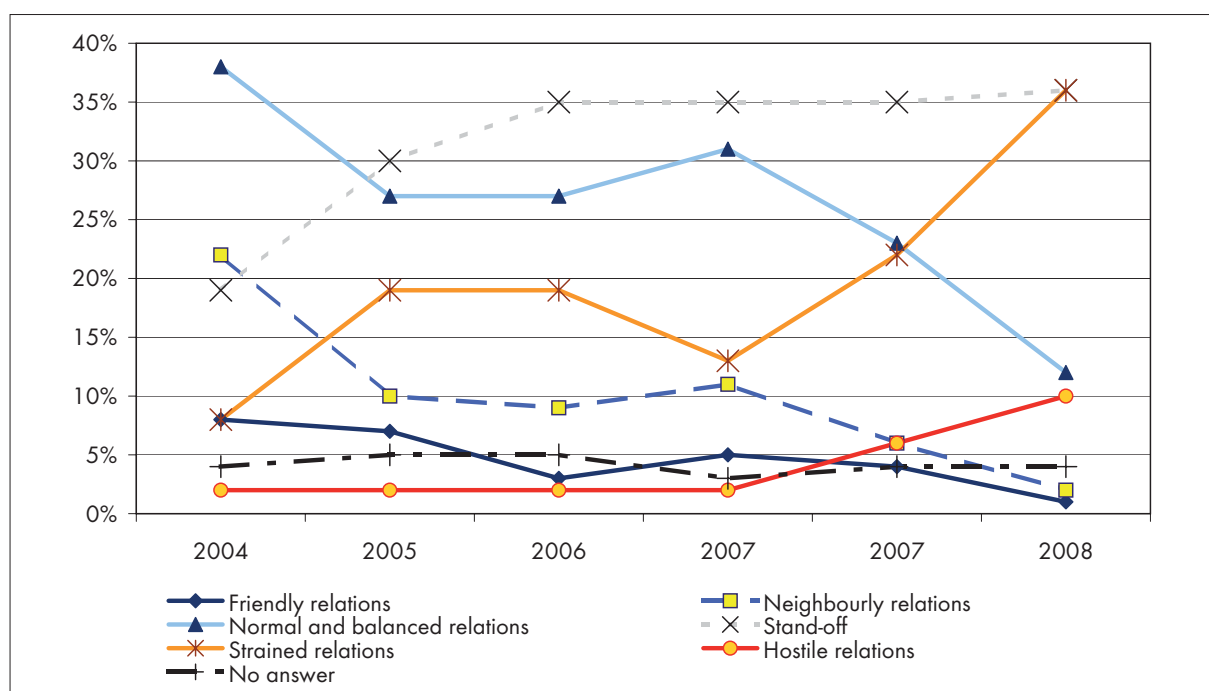
Graph 13: How Would You Describe the Present Overall Relations between Russia and the USA? (2001–2008)



Note: The month in which the poll was conducted varies for the different years. 2008 refers to mid-August.

Source: Surveys conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008082103.html>

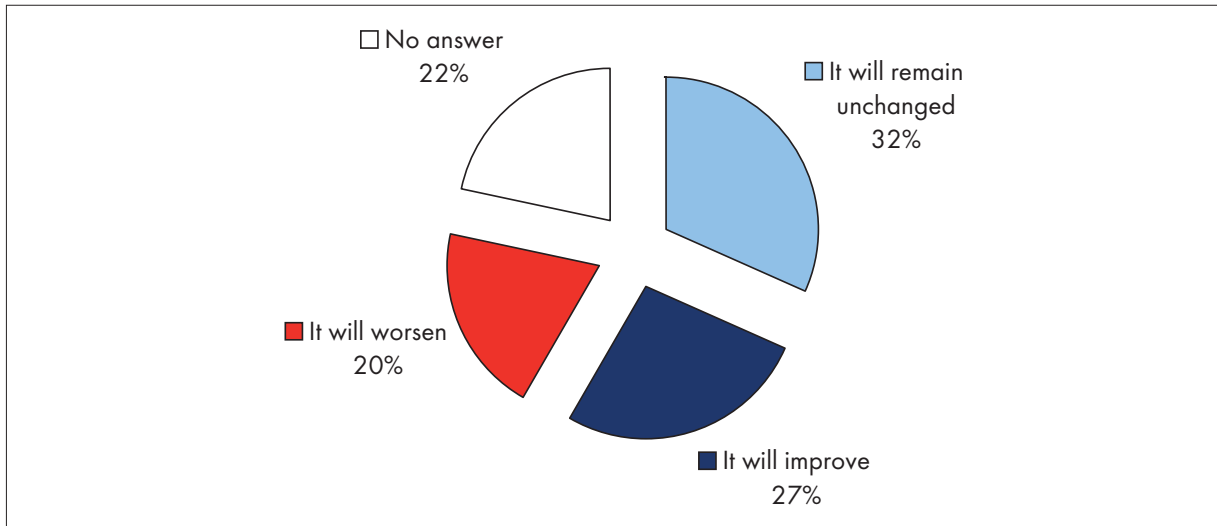
Graph 14: How Would You Describe the Present Relations between Russia and Ukraine? (2004–2008)



Note: The month in which the poll was conducted varies for the different years. 2008 refers to mid-August.

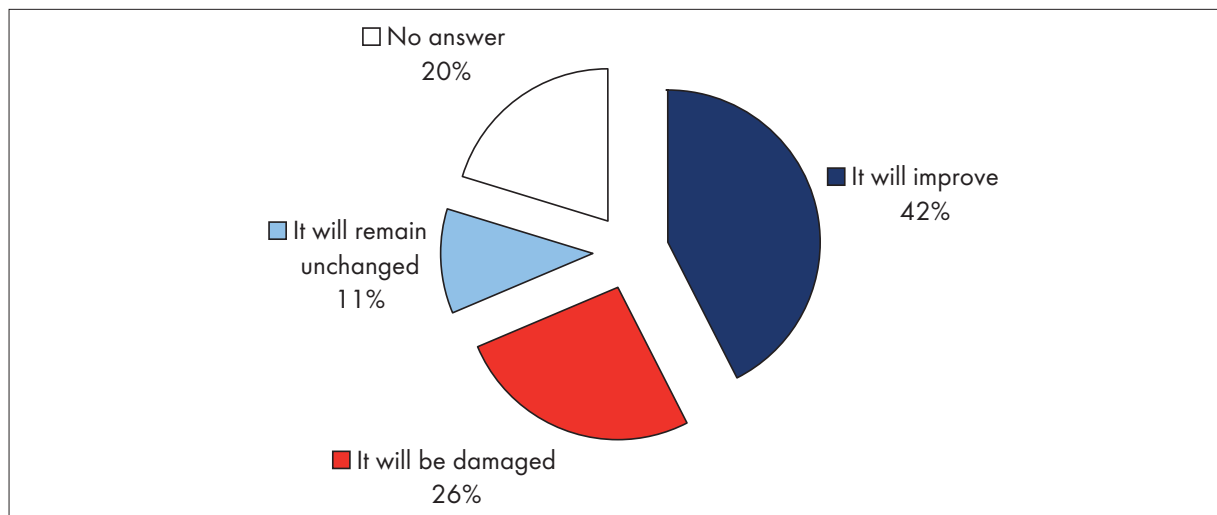
Source: Surveys conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008082103.html>

Graph 15: Do You Think that After the Military Conflict in Georgia the Attitude of the Rest of the World towards Russia Will Improve, Worsen or Remain Unchanged?



Source: Survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 16–17, 2008
<http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/dominant/dom0833/d083321>

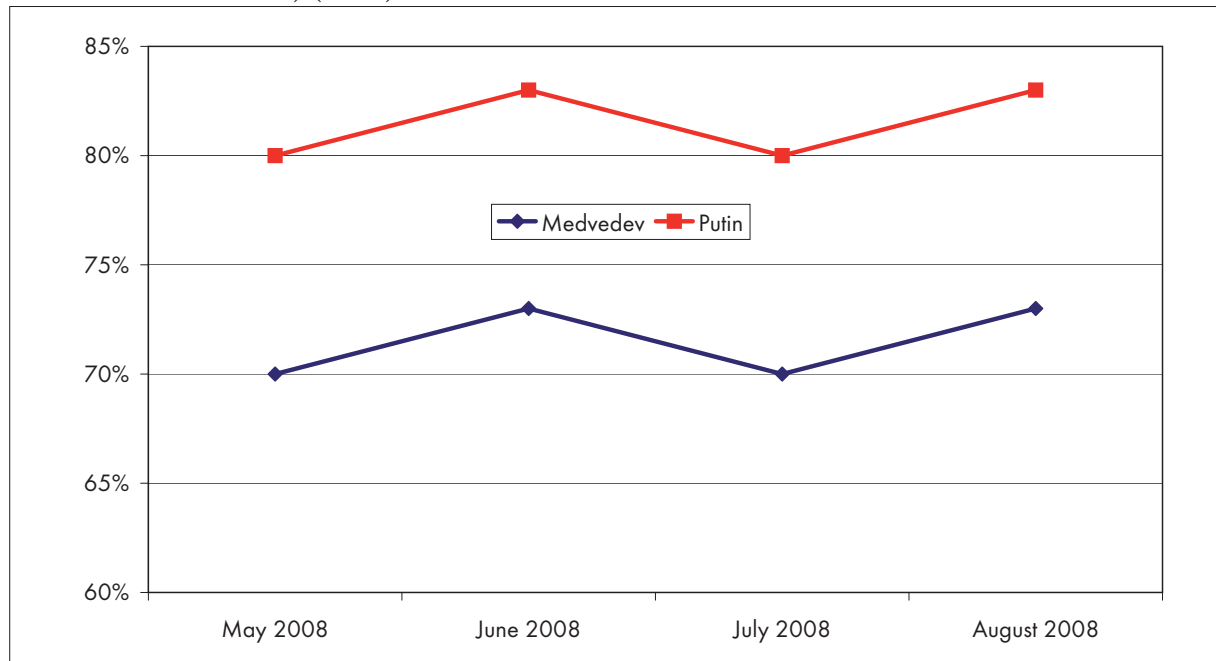
Graph 16: In Your Opinion, How Will Russia's Actions in the Military Conflict With Georgia Change Our Country's Image in the World: Will It Improve, Be Damaged or Remain Unchanged?



Source: Survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, August 16–17, 2008
<http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/dominant/dom0833/d083321>

6. The Image of Putin and Medvedev after the Georgian Conflict

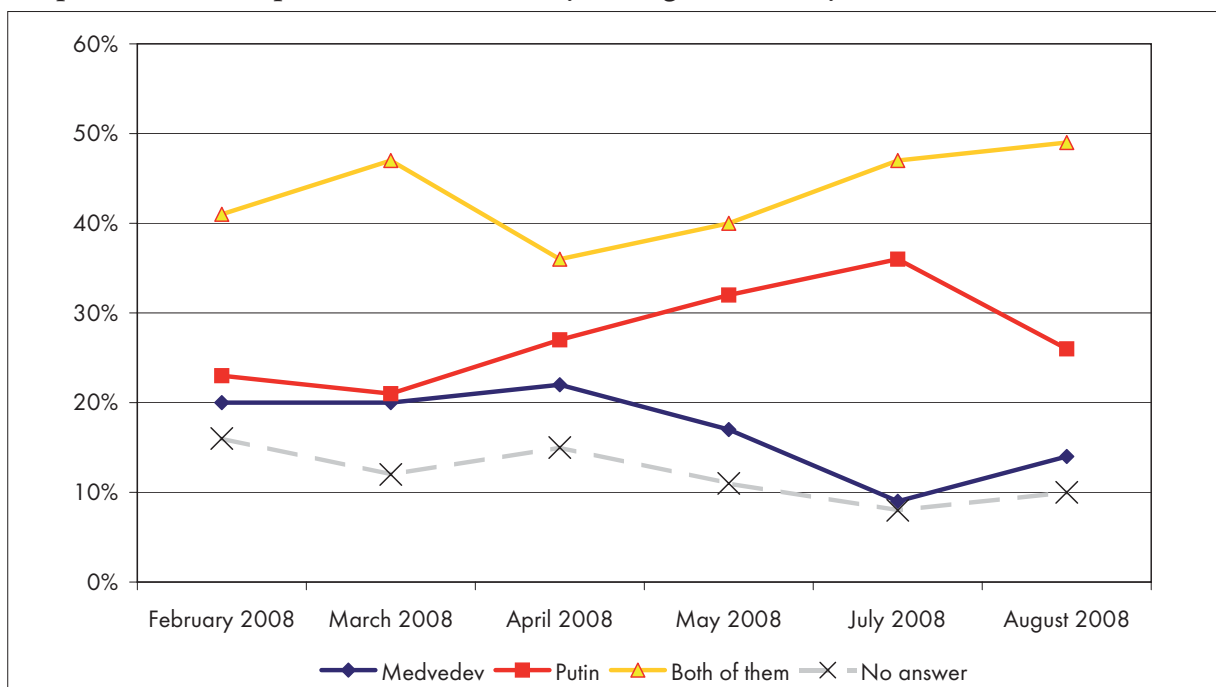
Graph 17: Do You Approve of the Policy of Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin? (Share of Confirmative Answers) (2008)



Note: Values for August refer to public opinion after the war.

Source: Surveys conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center; <http://www.levada.ru./press/2008082102.html>

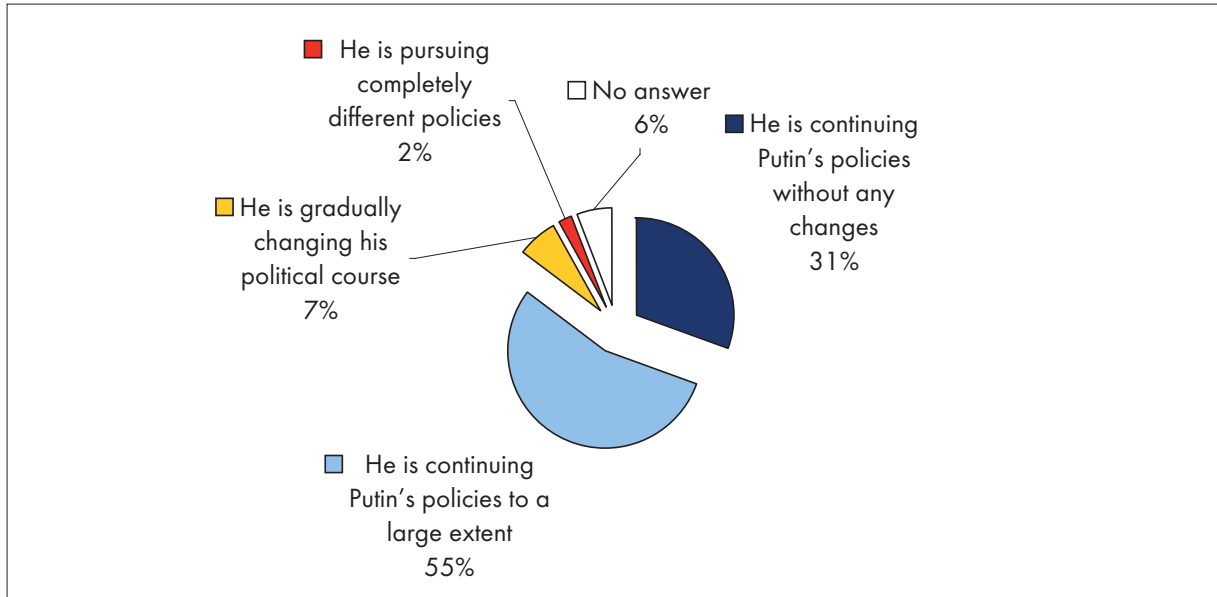
Graph 18: In Your Opinion, Who Is Actually Ruling the Country?



Note: Values for August refer to public opinion after the war.

Source: Surveys conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center; <http://www.levada.ru./press/2008082102.html>

Graph 19: Do You Think that Medvedev Is Continuing Putin's Policies or that His Policies Are Completely Different?



Source: Survey conducted by the Russian public opinion research institute Levada-Center, August 15–18, 2008
<http://www.levada.ru./press/2008082102.html>

Compiled and translated by Anna A. Petrova

Analysis

The Role of Chechens in the Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict

By Nathalie Ouvaroff, Moscow

Abstract

Battalions of Chechens, accustomed to difficult mountainous terrain, have helped to ensure the victory of Russia against Georgia in the August 2008 conflict. The Chechen military engagement is likely to complicate the fragile balance of forces in the Caucasus and could have incalculable, even dramatic, consequences for Chechnya's relations with Russia.

Consequences from the Fighting

After the end of Russia's military operations in Georgia, one can draw several conclusions: First, Georgia has lost the war against Russia and also lost its two regions – Abkhazia and South Ossetia for good. Georgia is very likely to win the diplomatic war against Russia and has NATO and the West firmly on its side, for the time being in terms of strong moral support. If the prospects for Georgia becoming a NATO member remain somewhat unclear and depend not least on the outcome of the US presidential elections, Georgia can, in any case, expect strong military help from the West in the future.

Second, Russia is victorious in a war which it did not really want – this is clear by its initial hesitation to intervene after the Georgian attack on South Ossetia. At the moment, Russia is rather isolated both within the CIS and within the international community, which is threatening to sanction the country (exclusion from the G8, postponing its admission to WTO). The West has already cancelled the dialogue with Russia in the NATO-Russia Council. Yet the West has few real possibilities to pressure Russia and now that Moscow has officially recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the West will have to accept this fact accompli whether it likes it or not.

Third, Russia's Georgian policy, which is not led by diplomats but by those within the Kremlin who are in charge of relations between Moscow and the former Soviet republics, was largely dictated by one imperative: to prevent Tbilisi from joining NATO at any cost. This goal was achieved by making sure that the tensions within Georgia's border regions remained high – a dangerous game that has provoked the Georgian attack on South Ossetia, but might backfire on Russia with regard to the stability of its own North Caucasus.

The Triumph of Ramzan Kadyrov

Observers who visited the breakaway republics of Georgia before the hostilities began noticed a significant increase in the presence of Chechen fighters, which

were most probably sent into Georgia with the blessing of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. The inhabitants of the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi, for example, claimed that the Chechens were responsible for a series of attacks that shook the city during the month of July, openly speaking of deliberate provocations in order to heat up the tensions between Abkhazia and Georgia.

With Russia's victory over Georgia, Ramzan Kadyrov thus also emerges on the winning side in this last Caucasus war. However, Kadyrov's victory may create problems for Chechen stability and Russian-Chechen relations.

History seems to repeat itself. Already in the early 1990s, volunteers from the North Caucasus helped the South Ossets and the Abkhaz in their conflicts with the Georgians. In the case of Abkhazia in particular, the Chechens played a large role under their then little-known commander Shamil Basayev. The same Basayev who fought very successfully on the Abkhaz side with Moscow's blessing later turned into one of Russia's greatest foes.

In the August 2008 Caucasus war, the Chechens might have again somewhat redeemed themselves in the eyes of the Kremlin by helping the Ossets and Abkhaz. Yet the same problem as in the early 1990s emerges, namely, that the Chechen forces are also increasingly less under the control of Moscow. At the same time, the Chechen republic experiences more frequent clashes among the different Chechen clans and armed groups, including clashes between the "official" forces of Kadyrov and Chechen Islamist rebels. In addition, clashes between rebel fighters and republican forces have also become more frequent in Chechnya's neighboring republics, particularly Ingushetia and Dagestan.

Not only has the situation inside Chechnya become less stable, but Kadyrov could also eventually lose support in the Kremlin. Putin has so far protected Kadyrov and the two are known to have good relations. Yet Russia's new president Dmitry Medvedev has

so far shown little sympathy for the Chechen ruler. An indication of this was the fact the Medvedev invited to his inauguration Vostok Battalion Commander Sulim Yamadaev, whom Kadyrov detests and was trying to get rid of. Also, when Putin was president, then Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov and some of Russia's generals repeatedly warned the Kremlin about Kadyrov's unpredictable nature and "devouring ambitions." Finally, the "siloviki" (members of the FSB and other security structures) have only half-heartily supported the idea of giving power to Kadyrov. During the so-called Chechenization campaign, most of the control for security in Chechnya was handed over to Kadyrov, which meant that Russia's law enforcement agencies were largely deprived not only of their power, but also of profits which they gained from illegal sales of weapons and oil.

Although there are no exact figures, it is assumed that several thousand Chechens participated in the recent Caucasus war: Even before the outbreak of the war, Chechnya contributed its fighters as border guards for Russia's peacekeeping forces along the interior Georgian borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These guards were supposed to help maintain peace and stability, yet they have in fact helped the Abkhaz expel the remaining Georgian forces from the Kodori valley in the recent conflict and took part in the fighting against the Georgians in South Ossetia. At least some of the Chechens were directly recruited by the South Ossetian and Abkhaz authorities. In particular Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh is known to have always maintained cordial relations with the Chechens and has never made a great effort to hide his sympathies for Chechen independence. In an interview with the French journal *Politique internationale* Bagapsh said "certainly, Chechnya will be independent one day, as will the other republics of the Caucasus. The time of empires is over."

There have been some reports in the Chechen press that some Chechens have also been fighting on the Georgian side, yet these remain unconfirmed and may be directed against some of Kadyrov's enemies inside Chechnya.

Chechen-Russian Relations

Up until recently, the majority of Chechnya's military forces depended to a large degree on the Russian Ministry of the Interior, with the exception of the two battalions, Vostok and Zapad, which are under the control of the Russian Ministry of Defense, as well as those armed units directly responsible to Kadyrov.

According to a senior officer with the FSB, who wishes to remain anonymous, "the Chechens in the conflicts along Russia's southern periphery are in fact partisans, not controlled by Russia's Ministry of Defense."

He expressed fear that the same might happen as in the early 1990s, when Shamil Basayev, who was initially supported by Russia, later turned against Russia. Moreover, the Russian military fears that this development destabilizes the situation throughout the Caucasus as it gives Kadyrov even more power. According to the FSB officer, it was Putin who took the risk when empowering Kadyrov, who is now increasingly taking matters into his own hands, not coordinating his actions with Moscow.

In the context of the Russian-Georgian conflict, the head of Chechen republic has managed to kill two birds with one shot. On the one hand, he sent his Chechens to Georgia's breakaway republics, thus representing his Chechens as loyal Russian citizens ready to defend their compatriots abroad (most Abkhaz and South Ossetians were given Russian citizenship over the past few years). Chechnya's involvement in the Georgian conflict has increased their reputation inside Russia. The terrorists, whom Putin until recently wanted to "drown in the toilets," have proven true patriots when they fought along the Abkhaz and Ossets and contributed to the defeat of the Georgian army, which was armed by the US. According to unconfirmed sources, Russian military especially admired the fighting moral of members of the Vostok battalion, which has suffered heavy losses (the battalion lost up to forty men, according to unconfirmed source). Official Russian media has also covered the operations of the Vostok battalion during the war and showed it in a positive light.

On the other, Kadyrov managed to tighten his control over the Vostok and Zapad battalions, which had so far enjoyed some degree of independence from him. In particular, at Kadyrov's insistence, Putin agreed to remove Yamadaev from the leadership of the Vostok battalion, even though Yamadaev was involved in the fighting in Ossetia. Yamadaev, who had during the 1990s fought in the ranks of those supporting Chechen independence, later turned pro-Russian when he successfully fought against the Chechen Islamists. He was also close to Akhmed Kadyrov, the father of Ramzan. After the death of the elder Kadyrov, Yamadaev soon came into conflict with his son who sought control over all the armed forces in Chechnya. During the war operations against South Ossetia, on 11 August, Yamadaev lost command of his battalion, which later was officially dismantled and put into reserve. Putin's decision was driven by his need to maintain good relations with Kadyrov given the new situation in the Caucasus.

Will Chechnya's Fragile Balance Hold?

Kadyrov has managed his entry into the realm of high politics as he played a role in the victory of the Russian forces in Georgia. He has indicated his readiness to

provide ten thousand men to the federal authorities to maintain peace. But the result of his machinations depends primarily on his ability to maintain civil peace at home while pursuing efforts to improve stability and living conditions in his republic. Yet the situation in Chechnya and in the whole Caucasus does look particularly favorable. Clan struggles over power and resources, combined with the existence of a radical Islamic threat, could quickly turn the region into a battlefield.

The Chechens living in the bigger cities want peace and stability above everything else and most Chechens in general approve of Kadyrov's policy, which has done a lot to improve living standards and rebuild the republic.

Yet the Chechens are also surprised that Moscow would grant independence to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while refusing Chechnya this right. Moscow's move might thus encourage the rebels' cause for independence and in fact, we do see an activation of the rebels' movements. This movement is recruiting young people who feel disenfranchised by Kadyrov's government – for example those from the former Vostok battalion. In a conversation shortly before his disgrace, Yamadev said that “combatants who are in the mountains are trained by Wahhabis financed by Saudi Arabia” and these men could eventually cause problems.

About the author

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This article is an English translation from the French original.

About the Russian Analytical Digest

Editors: Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle-uni-bremen.de) and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich). It is supported by the Otto Wolff Foundation and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russlandanalysen* (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.res.ethz.ch), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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The Research Centre possesses a unique collection of alternative culture and independent writings from the former socialist countries in its archive. In addition to extensive individual research on dissidence and society in socialist societies, since January 2007 a group of international research institutes is participating in a collaborative project on the theme "The other Eastern Europe – the 1960s to the 1980s, dissidence in politics and society, alternatives in culture. Contributions to comparative contemporary history", which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

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Any opinions expressed in Russian Analytical Digest are exclusively those of the authors.

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