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The war in Georgia and the Western response

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This article considers Western, and most particularly American, policy towards Tbilisi in the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008. The article does not accept the view of Russian leaders that the United States actively promoted the Georgian attack on South Ossetia. It does, however, argue that Washington’s alliance with Georgia was sufficiently close to make President Saakashvili believe he would receive American support in the event of war with Russia. The war, however, was not in America’s interest since it threatened its position in the South Caucasus and provided Russia with an opportunity to re-emphasize its growing power in the world.

Keywords: Georgia; War; Russia; US; Europe

Introduction

When news of the war in South Ossetia broke on 8 August 2008, Western governments were swift to condemn Moscow. High-ranking political figures, including the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, rushed to Tbilisi to pledge support for the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. Condoleezza Rice likened the Russian military intervention to the Soviet Union’s suppression of the Prague Spring 40 years earlier (the Guardian, 16 August 2008, p. 2), whilst the acting head of the Georgian embassy in London, Giorgi Baridze, compared it to Nazi incursions into Europe in the run-up to the Second World War (the Guardian, 12 August 2008, p. 1). The Swedish Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt, a long-time supporter of Saakashvili, seemed to agree and said the intervention had parallels with ‘the darkest chapters of Europe’s history’ (quoted from Asmus and Holbrooke 2008). The conflict, therefore, was generally perceived, not as a minor war on the periphery of Europe, but a major security challenge for the West (Traub 2008, US Embassy Cables 2008, Blank 2009).

This was the first time Moscow had attacked another independent, sovereign state since the fall of the Soviet Union and the war seemed to confirm the West in its conviction that Russia had adopted a more assertive foreign policy under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, especially since the beginning of his second term in 2004. Putin (2005) had described the dissolution of the Soviet Union as ‘a major catastrophe of the twentieth century’, and as Moscow invaded Georgia, many feared that Moscow was seeking to reconstitute the USSR and the old divisions of the cold war. Indeed, Condoleezza Rice warned Russia against trying to construct a new iron curtain in Europe (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 14 August 2008, p. 6), whilst Lech Kaczyński, an aide to the Polish President, expressed his fear on national TV that his country was now under threat from the re-emergence of Russian ‘imperialism’ (the Guardian, 25 November 2008, p. 16).

Moscow clearly had a case to answer. Russia had invaded and temporarily occupied a small neighbouring state. It blocked the main East–West road across the country, took
the town of Zugdidi and the vital port of Poti and threatened to choke off the Georgian economy. Russian forces also came to within 15 kilometres of Tbilisi and, according to Putin, were in a position to capture the Georgian capital in fewer than four hours (the Guardian, 12 September 2008, p. 18). The decision not to do so revealed Russia’s more limited war aims, but distrust remained when Moscow was slow to abide by the terms of the cease-fire agreement negotiated by the European Union (EU) on 12 August 2008. It needed a second implementation agreement before Russian forces finally withdrew from Georgia on 8 October, although they were still allowed, by the terms of the agreement, to remain in the two breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Moscow further alienated international opinion when it unilaterally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on 26 August 2008 (US Embassy Cables 2008). Moscow has remained largely isolated on the issue, and significantly, none of the Soviet successor states has followed suit, fearing that recognition could legitimize future Russian interference in their own domestic affairs.

It was clear that the West was not alone in its condemnation of Moscow’s actions in Georgia. There was no support for Moscow at the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) meeting on 22 August 2008 and China, amongst Russia’s closer post-Soviet allies, refused to back Moscow and went so far as to offer Tbilisi aid for reconstruction after the war (Zakaria, 2008, p. 32, Gahrton 2010, p. 182). There was certainly no alliance of the dictatorships on this issue, as Robert Kagan might have predicted (2008, pp. 86–87). The West, for its part, was united in its concern over the possible security implications of the five-day war, but remained more divided over its analysis of the conflict itself and how this should affect relations with Russia. The US and UK, backed in particular by Poland and the Baltic States took a hard line, whilst much of Western Europe, led by France and Germany, reacted rather more cautiously (Blank 2009, pp. 104–121). Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, was reported to dislike Saakashvili personally and perceived him to be a maverick who could not be trusted. The French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, was better pre-disposed to Saakashvili, but still believed he had been in error to challenge Russia militarily in South Ossetia (Asmus 2010, pp. 92–93). Angela Merkel, summed up the majority view in the EU when she refused to put all the blame for the war on Russia’s shoulders, but acknowledged that ‘some of Russia’s actions were not proportionate’ (the Guardian, 16 August 2008, p. 1).

Although there were critics who implied that the French and German policy was a form of appeasement (see Asmus 2010, pp. 120, 156), it is the argument of this paper that Sarkozy and Merkel were right to act in a more even-handed manner towards Russia. For there were three main problems with the approach led by the Americans. First, the origins of the war were, as Merkel and Sarkozy suggested, more complex than Washington implied at the time. It was certainly mistaken to suggest that Russia should take sole responsibility. Second, the US wanted to divert attention from its own role in the war. Washington may not have given Saakashvili ‘a green light’ to launch the attack on South Ossetia, as the Georgian Ambassador to Moscow, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, later claimed (Vremya novostei, 26 November 2008, p. 2), but, at a minimum, the United States could have done more, as Tbilisi’s closest ally, to restrain Saakashvili and the more hawkish elements in his government. Finally and not unimportantly, the US policy in Georgia was a failure. It failed to prevent the war and failed to prevent its ally from suffering a comprehensive military defeat. Russia, on the other hand, succeeded in containing Washington’s attempt to extend its influence in the South Caucasus and increase its control over energy supplies from the Caspian Basin. In so doing, Moscow reinforced its image as a power which was able and willing to defend its interests in its own backyard. These three criticisms of US policy will be considered in the rest of the paper.
The origins of the war

The Georgian view

Tbilisi argued that Moscow never fully accepted Georgian independence after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. This helped explain Russia’s support for the three national republics on Georgian territory – Ajaria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia – in their respective secessionist struggles with the central authorities. Tbilisi, however, always rejected the idea of independence for three main reasons. First, the republics were strategically important to Georgia. Georgia was a small country with a declining population of under five million and could ill afford to be broken up into ever-smaller entities. Second, the three national republics had virtually no history of independence, in Georgian eyes, and were only sustainable in their current form due to continued Russian support. Their economies were weak and, as a result, the republics had increasingly become centres of organized crime, smuggling and the black market which threatened to destabilize the rest of Georgia and its future as an independent and democratic state (Goltz 2009, p. 18, Welt 2010, pp. 72, 77).

As a result, Georgia had felt compelled to use force as the USSR split up to suppress secessionist uprisings in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In both cases, the Georgians were unable militarily to overcome the rebels – a fact they blamed on Russian interference. However, peace agreements were finally signed, in 1992 and 1994 respectively, providing the republics with autonomy but not formal independence. In South Ossetia, the peace was monitored by Russian and Georgian peacekeepers to protect the two main ethnic groups. In Abkhazia, large numbers of Georgians had been driven out of the republic during the war and only Russian forces were deployed as peacekeepers, albeit under a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) flag, with Georgia remaining in control only of parts of the Kodori Gorge (Goltz 2009, p. 27). All three republics were able to manipulate the weakness of the Shevardnadze government to gain de facto independence whilst Moscow forced Georgia to accept membership of the CIS and four Russian military bases on its territory. The agreement led to one critic, Melor Sturua, describing the relationship between Moscow and Tbilisi as semi-colonial (International Herald Tribune, 30–31 October 1993, p. 2).

There were tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi throughout the post-Soviet period, but they escalated greatly after Mikheil Saakashvili was elected President in January 2004. This was largely because Saakashvili was more active than his predecessor in seeking to reduce Russian influence in Georgia at a time when Putin himself was adopting a more nationalist position at home. There were times in 2004 and 2006 when Tbilisi and Moscow seemed close to conflict, but Saakashvili later said it was after a meeting with Putin in February 2008 that he became convinced that Moscow was seriously preparing for war (Asmus 2010, p. 144). Russia conducted major military manoeuvres in the Caucasus in July and the shelling of Georgian villages in South Ossetia, which had been going on since the spring, was greatly intensified on the eve of the war (Felgenhauer 2008). At the same time, Saakashvili received intelligence reports that suggested that Russian forces were entering South Ossetia in significant numbers through the Roki tunnel. It seemed Moscow intended to annex the republic by force and re-establish Russian dominance over Georgia and the South Caucasus region. In the circumstances, the Georgian President claimed, he had no choice but to respond with force to pre-empt a major Russian assault on the republic and defend the Georgian minority in South Ossetia.
The Russian view

The Russians, on the other hand, argued that the Georgians initiated the war when they launched a major assault on the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali on the night of 7–8 August 2008 (Kommersant, 9 August 2008, p. 2). The aim, according to Moscow, was to take back control of South Ossetia which had been the long-term goal of Georgian leaders. The first post-Soviet leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, had called for a ‘Georgia for Georgians’ (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 1, p. 13), whilst Saakashvili in his 2004 presidential election referred to ‘gathering in the Georgian lands’ (Vedomosti, 13 August 2008). Such rhetoric alienated Georgian minorities, even if it appealed to Georgian nationalists. Saakashvili quickly made good his election promises when Ajaria’s autonomy was formally abolished in Spring 2004. Moscow made no attempt to prevent this happening. More than 90% of the Ajarian population was ethnically Georgian and, therefore, more amenable to the idea of re-integration with Georgia. Furthermore, their leader, Aslan Abashidze, had run the republic like a private fiefdom and become increasingly unpopular at home. Therefore, his overthrow by the Georgian authorities in May was largely welcomed in Ajaria and Moscow provided the plane to take him into exile.

Saakashvili seemed to expect that similar pressure would also force out Eduard Kokoity, the leader in South Ossetia (Welt 2010, p. 72). In July 2004, Saakashvili predicted that ‘Georgia will regain control over Tskhinvali very soon and nothing can obstruct this process’ (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 2, pp. 108–109). In fact, the situation in South Ossetia was very different to Ajaria and his attempt to take control failed. The majority of South Ossetians remained implacably opposed to reintegration after the war in the early 1990s, and Moscow was prepared to back them in this. In fact, Saakashvili’s clumsy intervention only succeeded in convincing both Abkhazia and South Ossetia of their need of Russia as their main protector against the possibility of further Georgian attacks (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 1, p. 30).

Nevertheless, there seemed to be some hope of rapprochement between Moscow and Tbilisi in the early days of the Saakashvili’s administration. Moscow had been cooperative over the Ajaria dispute and a year later Putin promised to remove all the Russian military bases from Georgia by 2008. Saakashvili, in turn, went to the United Nations (UN) in December 2005 and put forward a proposal offering both Abkhazia and South Ossetia broad autonomy within the Georgian state. This offer may have been genuine, but there was a high level of mistrust of the Georgian President (George 2008, p. 1162). As a result, relations soon soured amidst spy scandals, various trade embargoes and renewed tension over the national republics. Moscow, for its part, argued that Saakashvili never abandoned the idea of forcibly taking back Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As evidence, the Kremlin cited Saakashvili’s refusal on the eve of the war to sign an agreement on the non-use of force in return for further negotiations with the Russians over the autonomy of the two national republics (Izvestiya, 27 August 2008, p. 1).

Moscow claimed it was unprepared for the war in South Ossetia. Neither Putin nor Medvedev was in Moscow at the time. Putin was at the opening of the Olympics in Beijing and Medvedev was on his summer holiday. Therefore, Moscow was only able to respond 48 hours after the initial assault on Tskhinvali, and its military intervention was described by the Russian President as purely defensive (Kommersant, 9 August 2008, p. 2). In contrast, the Georgian assault was portrayed as an act of genocide in which 2000 Russian peacekeepers and South Ossetians were killed. Nevertheless, Russian forces were able to re-establish control in South Ossetia relatively swiftly. At the same time, they reinforced their position in Abkhazia to defend against a possible attack from Georgia. Abkhaz forces also seized the opportunity to drive the Georgian military out of the Kodori Gorge whilst Russia pushed into Georgia proper. Putin (2008) claimed this move had no imperial design, but was simply to
destroy military installations which had been used in the initial attack on Tskhinvali and to deter a similar attack on Abkhazia. Anatoly Nogovitsyn, the deputy head of Russian forces, however, implied rather more extensive war aims which seemed to include the effective dismantling of Georgia’s military capability (*Moscow News*, 13 August 2008, p. 1).

**The official European Union view**

There were clear disagreements between Moscow and Tbilisi regarding the causes of the war. There were some differences of opinion within the EU too. On 3 September 2008, the EU Parliament formally recognized Georgia’s responsibility for starting the war, but the divisions within Europe were revealed when its only explicit condemnation was directed solely at Russia (Gahrton 2010, pp. 181–182). In an attempt to offer a more authoritative view on the war, the Council of Europe set up a commission which was chaired by the experienced Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, and it reported its conclusions in September 2009. Although Georgia has taken issue with its main finding over the ultimate responsibility for the war, the report remains the most comprehensive and objective account of the conflict currently available (Tagliavini Commission 2009).

The report was critical of both sides, but accepted Georgia’s claim that Moscow acted provocatively in a number of ways in the lead-up to the war. For example, the report criticized Moscow’s policy of distributing Russian passports to South Ossetian and Abkhaz citizens on a collective basis from 2002. By the time of the war, most had become Russian citizens which enabled Moscow to justify its intervention in both republics in terms of defending its own nationals. Asmus and Holbrooke (2008), in an article published during the war, were particularly outspoken in their condemnation of this ‘collective passportisation’ policy, declaring it ‘a tactic reminiscent of one used by Nazi Germany at the start of World War II’. The Commission in rather more sober language simply argued that the policy, which was carried out against the wishes of the authorities in Tbilisi, was a potential threat to Georgian sovereignty and a contravention of international law (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 2, p. 171).

The Commission also criticized Moscow’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the war. Medvedev claimed that Moscow was simply acting in response to persistent appeals for support from the local populations in the two national republics. They had been persecuted by the Georgian authorities over a prolonged period of time, and Medvedev cited the Western recognition of Kosovo as a possible precedent for Moscow’s decision (*Izvestiya*, 27 August 2008, p. 1). Although there was some sympathy for the Russian argument amongst some international lawyers, the Commission rejected the Russian case. For it was argued that Moscow had violated a series of UN resolutions in relation to the issue of recognition, including United Nations Security Council Resolution 1080 which had been passed in April 2008 with Russian support (Kakachia 2009, p. 7). The Commission also argued that Kosovar independence had only been accepted by the international community after considerable discussion with all the interested parties in the UN and other international bodies. This was in contrast to Russia, it was said, which acted unilaterally and recognized the two national republics before it had fully abided by the ceasefire terms of 12 August 2008 (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 1, p. 24).

The report also accepted that there had been heightened military activity between Georgian and South Ossetian forces at least from the spring of 2008, and further acknowledged that there was evidence of Russian militia and volunteers moving into the region before the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali. Moreover, the fact that South Ossetian civilians were being evacuated from the republic in early August did suggest that Moscow was expecting some kind of conflict in the area (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 1, p. 19). On the other hand, the report explicitly refuted the key Georgian claim that there was ‘a large-scale military incursion into South Ossetia
by the Russians before 8 August 2008’ (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 1, p. 20). The evidence suggested that both sides had been preparing for the possibility of war in the summer of 2008, but the Commission argued that Georgia ultimately had initiated it, when on the night of 7–8 August it launched a major aerial and ground attack on the South Ossetian capital which went on for three days and was on a scale far greater than any of the earlier skirmishes.

Although there have been debates over the legality of Russia’s military response (Allison 2008, p. 1152), the report accepted the right of Moscow to defend its peacekeepers and South Ossetian civilians (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 1, pp. 22–23). On the other hand, it dismissed Russia’s claims of genocide, thereby rejecting Russia’s contention that its intervention could be justified in international law as an act of humanitarian intervention (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 2, p. 284). Russia had claimed that 2000 had been killed in the battle over Tskhinvali, but the Commission reported the actual number to be 162 (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 2, p. 223). The Commission also argued that Moscow had acted disproportionately when its forces extended their military action from defending the civilians in Tskhinvali and pushed far beyond the national republic of South Ossetia into Abkhazia and Georgia proper. In sum, the Commission was highly critical of many aspects of Russian behaviour in Georgia, but it was absolutely clear on the key point that Georgia bore primary responsibility for the war itself (Tagliavini Commission, vol. 1, p. 32).

The US view

The Bush administration, however, remained outspoken in its condemnation of Moscow throughout the war. There was no criticism of Georgia’s attack on the South Ossetian capital. On the contrary, President Bush (2008), in his first statement on the war, offered ‘America’s unwavering support for Georgia’s democratic government’, and said the US will continue ‘to rally the free world in the defence of a free Georgia’. The US shipped back about 2000 Georgian troops, which had been involved in peacekeeping duties in Iraq, to help defend Tbilisi from the possibility of a Russian attack (Nezavisimaya gazeta, 10 September 2008, p. 1). The Bush administration also promised to rebuild the Georgian military after the war, to redouble its campaign for Georgian membership of NATO and to provide extensive economic aid which would make Georgia the fourth biggest recipient of American aid in the world (after Israel, Egypt and Iraq) (Traub 2008, p. 3, the Guardian, 5 September 2008, p. 20). As Cooley and Mitchell (2009, p. 35) noted shortly after the war, this looked remarkably like a ‘reward for aggression’.

Why did Washington adopt such a position? Mikhail Gorbachev (2008, p. 29), the former Soviet President, called it ‘unbalanced’. It might be argued that the US government was not fully aware of the facts on the ground. There was certainly considerable confusion in the reports emanating from Tskhinvali at the time but, it seems, Washington was better placed than most to know what the Saakashvili government was doing. Ronald Asmus (2010, p. 47), an adviser to the US government, has since confirmed that the US was privy to Georgian military planning prior to the attack on South Ossetia. Furthermore, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Daniel Fried, has also acknowledged that the US received information on the morning of 7 August that Georgian forces were deploying to the edge of the conflict zone (Asmus, 2010, p. 165).

In fact, it seems Washington was not so much ignorant of, as willing to turn a blind eye to, Georgian mobilization. Georgia had become America’s key ally in the south Caucasus and Washington was willing to support Tbilisi in its power struggle with Russia for two main reasons. First, the US had, in Dick Cheney’s words, ‘a deep and abiding interest, in the region’ (the Guardian, 5 September 2008, p. 20). Georgia had some strategic importance for
America’s war on terrorism, but its primary significance was economic and as a transit route for oil and gas from the Caspian Sea to the West. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which opened in May 2006, had become a vital source of revenue for Georgia, but its particular value to the West lay in the fact that the pipeline circumvented Russia, thereby reducing the growing Western dependency on Russian energy. As a result, Moscow’s military intervention in Georgia was seen as a threat to the American energy policy in the region. In fact, Russian forces never threatened the BTC oil pipeline but, as Moscow moved into Georgia, Condoleezza Rice declared that Washington would never allow Russia to drive the West out of the Caucasus (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 14 August 2008, p. 6).

Second, Washington viewed the crisis between Russia and Georgia in terms of the worldwide struggle between democracy and dictatorship. Adopting the ideas of democratic peace theory (Doyle 1986, Russett 1993, Kagan 2008), the White House believed Russia’s more aggressive foreign policy, epitomized by the invasion of Georgia, was a result of a shift towards authoritarianism under the presidency of Vladimir Putin. Condoleezza Rice articulated this view when she argued that Russia had become ‘increasingly authoritarian at home and aggressive abroad’ (the Guardian, 19 September 2008, p. 32), and went on to suggest that the main aim of the Russian intervention was the overthrow of democracy in Georgia (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 14 August 2008, p. 6). Such a paradigm might not have been entirely inappropriate, but it was too rigidly applied in the case of Russia’s relations with Georgia. For it led to Washington exaggerating the democratic credentials of the Saakashvili administration, whilst at the same time simplifying, if not distorting, the underlying causes of the war. It also provided a justification for America to pursue a policy that was aimed at weakening Russia internally and undermining its policy goals abroad.

The US alliance with Saakashvili

Eduard Shevardnadze’s presidency came to an end as a result of the Rose Revolution in November 2003. The catalyst for the uprising was the claim of fraudulent parliamentary elections, but widespread poverty and corruption were equally important (Kommersant, 9 August 2008, p. 2). Moscow, however, blamed foreign interference for the popular revolt. The importance of Western support for the Rose Revolution remains disputed, but the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) did provide financial support for the groups which campaigned against Shevardnadze’s government, and the US National Democratic Institute played a role in publicizing the fraudulent nature of the elections (Nilsson 2009, p. 102). The Bush government itself did not appear to be involved directly, but it was quick to welcome Saakashvili’s election as Georgian President in January 2004. Shevardnadze as Georgian President had tried to pursue a delicate balancing act in foreign policy between Moscow and the West. This had included the Shevardnadze government supporting the American war in Iraq, for example, but Saakashvili was more anti-Russian in his rhetoric and more willing to accommodate American interests. This was not altogether surprising. Saakashvili had studied law in the US, spoke excellent English, and enjoyed close relations with a number of high-ranking political figures in Washington across the political spectrum, including John McCain, Richard Holbrooke and Joe Biden (Blank 2009, p. 117).

Georgia was the first of the Soviet successor states to experience a so-called ‘coloured revolution’, but as they spread to Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005, it appeared that reformist, pro-Western governments might become the norm across the former Soviet Union. This was clearly the hope in Washington. In 2005, President George W. Bush visited Tbilisi and said the Rose Revolution would act as ‘a beacon of liberty’ across the region (Bush 2005). Moscow, on the other hand, viewed the coloured revolutions in an entirely negative light. Instead of seeing them as a demonstration of popular will, they were perceived in the
Kremlin as a form of enforced regime change engineered from Washington. Although the chance of revolution reaching Russia seemed remote, Putin invoked the fear of externally inspired unrest to justify the strengthening of the Russian state and the reduction of foreign influence in the country. Leaders in Uzbekistan and Belarus, Islam Karimov and Alexander Lukashenko respectively, also adopted more repressive measures and both were able to hold on to power in the face of popular revolt in 2005 and 2006. The momentum of popular revolt had been halted and this was confirmed in 2010 when Ukraine voted in February for the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych to replace the leader of the Orange Revolution, Viktor Yushchenko; and Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the leader of the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, was ousted in a coup the following April.

Initially, however, Georgia appeared to prosper under Saakashvili’s presidency, and after years of economic decline, the economy grew four-fold between 2004 and 2008. Saakashvili also made genuine attempts to democratize the political system and tackle the problem of corruption (Jones 2009, p. 95). However, there was a central contradiction in his policy making that undermined his efforts. In order to implement his policies effectively, he increased the powers of the presidency and state which led to growing internal opposition, with ethnic and religious minorities feeling they suffered disproportionately from Saakashvili’s initiatives (George 2008, George 2009). However, it was Saakashvili closing down the opposition TV station, Imedi, which brought 50,000 people on to the streets in November 2007 calling for the President’s resignation. Blaming the Russian Secret Services for the unrest, the Georgian authorities responded with force and called a temporary state of emergency (see Gahrton 2010, pp. 156–159). Saakashvili was re-elected as President in January 2008 with 53% of the vote and, despite claims of electoral fraud, he chose to interpret the result as a mandate to pursue his pro-Western policies with renewed vigour. An important part of his programme, which he believed to have genuine support in the country, was a final settlement to the problem of the two national republics.2

After re-election, Saakashvili toured Western capitals in an attempt to gain support for a renewed commitment to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia (the Guardian, 12 August 2008, p. 6). Angela Merkel was reportedly appalled when she learnt that the military option was being seriously considered once more (Asmus 2010, p. 156). Ostensibly, Washington seemed more sympathetic to Saakashvili’s proposal. In fact, the American policy remained the same – support for Georgian territorial integrity, but opposition to the use of force. Ronald Asmus is insistent that there could have been no misunderstanding on this latter point. It was made, he says, on many occasions to different officials and politicians in the Georgian government and was reiterated once more by Condoleezza Rice to Mikheil Saakashvili when she visited Tbilisi shortly before the war in July 2008 (US Embassy Cables 2007, Asmus 2010, p. 48, Harding 2010). Daniel Fried (2008) also said in later testimony: ‘We had warned the Georgians many times in the previous days and weeks against using force, and on 7 August we warned them repeatedly not to take such a step. We pointed out that the use of force, even in the face of provocations, would lead to disaster.’

Yet, Saakashvili ignored such warnings. Why? We cannot know for certain, but it does seem that Saakashvili, despite all the American protestations, continued to believe that the US would back him in extremis (Garton Ash 2008, p. 31, Blank 2009, p. 116, Papava 2009, p. 205). Carl Bildt discovered this when Saakashvili told him after a meeting with President Bush at the NATO summit in April 2008 that he had received ‘some kind of flashing yellow light for military action if things continued on their present course’ (Asmus 2010, p. 143). The US was reportedly bewildered by Saakashvili’s interpretation of his meeting with Bush and the US Ambassador to Georgia, John Tefft, was delegated to re-emphasize America’s opposition to the use of force. Yet, there were other instances of possible mixed messages or misinterpretations. For example, Condoleezza Rice, on her visit to Tbilisi in July, was said to be very clear in cautioning...
against the military option in private meetings with Saakashvili, but her public statements might have sounded more equivocal to some Georgian ears when she also emphasized America’s ‘obligations to defend our allies’ (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 2, p. 47). There were also doubts that Washington was absolutely united on the issue and it has been suggested that Saakashvili heard other conflicting voices on his frequent visits to the US (Garton Ash 2008, p. 31).

This mistaken perception might also have been reinforced through President Bush’s strong public backing for Georgia (and Ukraine) becoming members of NATO. This culminated in strong American lobbying at the Bucharest summit in April 2008 when Washington called for the two Soviet successor states to be offered a Membership Action Plan (MAP) – the first formal step towards full membership. Although popular in Georgia, Moscow had made it absolutely plain that NATO membership for either Soviet successor state would be seen as contrary to Russian security interests. It was defined as a ‘red line’ for the Kremlin (Prikhodko 2008). Although Moscow had earlier accepted the enlargement of NATO in Eastern Europe, it had always been seen as a betrayal of promises made to Gorbachev when the cold war ended (Deudney and Ikenberry 2009–10, p. 50). Furthermore, NATO was perceived by Moscow to have changed its nature from a collective defence organization to a more aggressive and expansionist alliance as it latterly fought wars in the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan (Deudney and Ikenberry 2009–10, p. 51). France and Germany seemed more willing to acknowledge Russian concerns and played a leading role in blocking Georgia and Ukraine being offered the MAP at the summit. However, as a concession to Washington, a statement was issued at Bucharest promising the two Soviet successor states NATO membership sometime in the future. Moscow was outraged and responded by increasing the number of peacekeepers in Abkhazia, in apparent contravention of the 1994 peace agreement. It also sent soldiers to repair the Black Sea coastal railway which linked the republic to military bases in Russia, and these links proved important in Russia’s push into Georgia proper during the war.

The Western decision to recognize the independence of Kosovo in February 2008 has also been recognized as another key external factor in the lead-up to war in Georgia (Wood 2008, Popjanevskii 2009, p. 143). Washington pressed for recognition, whilst Moscow was adamantly opposed to the move, and Saakashvili was gravely concerned at the time over the possible implications for Georgia (US Embassy Cables 2007). At the time, it was thought that Moscow’s opposition related to a fear of setting a precedent for Chechnya. This might have been one factor, but Putin had been quite explicit in arguing that recognition would also have ramifications for Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 1, p. 30). Indeed, after the recognition of Kosovo, Moscow opened consular relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia which, in retrospect, seemed to lay the foundations for their subsequent full diplomatic recognition by Russia. It seemed both sides were preparing for some kind of resolution to the long-standing problems of the two national republics.

In this respect, Moscow shared the national republics’ growing concern over the Georgian military build-up since Saakashvili became President. The Georgian military could not compete with the Russian, but by the time of the war in South Ossetia, ‘Georgian armed forces had about doubled their strength in terms of manpower compared to the Shevardnadze years, with much better training and equipment than ever before, and much of this newly acquired military strength was garrisoned on modernised military bases; the most important of them in Senaki facing Abkhazia and the other one near Gori facing South Ossetia’ (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 1, p. 15). This build-up had been possible due to military aid and training from the US, supported by Israel, Ukraine and the Czech Republic. When Saakashvili launched the assault on Tskhinvali, there were over 100 US military advisers present in Georgia and other American officials involved at different levels within the Georgian administration. The annual US-led military exercise, called ‘Immediate Response’ also took place as tensions rose in
mid-July 2008 at the Vaziani base outside Tbilisi involving approximately 2,000 troops from
Georgia, US, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine (Glenny 2008, p. 14). The US always main-
tained that its military aid was directed towards counter-terrorism and was wholly inappropriate
for any more offensive action such as that in South Ossetia (Allison 2008, p. 1165). This may
have been true, but it is scarcely surprising that Moscow had become concerned over Washing-
ton’s increasing military support for the Saakashvili government which was committed to elimi-
nating Russian influence in Georgia.

In fact, the Russian government was very public in its conviction that Washington bore
heavy responsibility for the Georgian assault on Tskhinvali. Prime Minister Putin in a press con-
ference after the war argued that the US instructors in Georgia had ‘helped to mobilise Georgian
forces’ (the Guardian, 12 September 2008, p. 18), and went so far as to suggest that the US had
‘prompted the Georgian side to launch a military operation’ (Putin 2008). President Medvedev
was equally critical of the Western involvement in Georgia. He said the prospect of Georgia
joining NATO had been ‘a seriously destabilising factor’, and argued that Saakashvili’s position
on the autonomous republics had hardened after a meeting with Condoleezza Rice in the US (the
Guardian, 13 September 2008, p. 30). He also expressed concern that foreign political and
material support had only served to reinforce the perception of impunity amongst the Georgian
leaders (Izvestiya, 27 August 2008, p. 1). Medvedev further argued that American support for
Georgia had been far from disinterested. Indeed, he claimed that the war had provided the
West with a pretext to increase its presence in the southern Caucasus and threaten Russian inter-
ests, including the deployment of NATO warships in the Black Sea (Izvestiya, 6 November 2008,
p. 1).

What was Saakashvili trying to achieve by going to war in South Ossetia? It is still far from
clear but, as stated earlier, Moscow claimed it was another attempt to abolish South Ossetian
autonomy and subject the republic to control from Tbilisi. The Commander of the Georgian con-
tingent of joint peacekeeping forces, Brigadier General Mamuka Kurashvili, seemed to corrobo-
rate this when he declared that the intention in South Ossetia was ‘to restore constitutional order’
(Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 2, p. 220). Moscow also presented Order Number 2 to the
Tagliavini Commission as further evidence. The order was sent to the Georgian Commander
in the field and stated that ‘the task force shall carry out a combat operation in the Samachablo
[South Ossetia] region and rout the enemy within 72 hours. Georgia’s jurisdiction,’ it stated,
‘shall be restored in the region’ (Russian Foreign Ministry 2009). Saakashvili denied this was
ever his intention. Instead, he said he was simply seeking to defend the Georgian minority in
South Ossetia in the face of Russian aggression. Ronald Asmus (2010, pp. 39–40) supports
the official Georgian view, suggesting that Georgia never had the military capacity to take the
republic from the Russians. Georgia only had about 10,000 troops available when it launched
its attack on Tskhinvali. Another 2,000 were away on peacekeeping duty, whilst many of
those used on the battlefield were not combat-ready at the time. Moscow, on the other hand,
had complete mastery of the skies and 25,000–30,000 Russian troops in the region, backed
up by several thousand South Ossetian militia and up to 10,000 more Abkhaz forces (Tagliavini

It was clearly a risk for Saakashvili to launch the assault on Tskhinvali. There were reports
which suggested that he had gone to war against the advice of some of his own military officers
who feared that Georgia would not be able to resist Russia if it chose to intervene (Nezavisimaya
gazeta, 10 September 2008, p. 1). It seems, however, that Saakashvili came to the view that he
had built up sufficient military capacity to take Tskhinvali in a surprise attack and initially
claimed to have taken all of South Ossetia except for a small mountain village (Gahrton
2010, p. 176). However, the Russians were soon able to force the Georgians back and the
Georgian parliamentary inquiry later argued that Saakashvili had been remiss in grossly
under-estimating the likely Russian response (Gahrton 2010, p. 196). For Saakashvili had calculated that if Moscow were presented with a fait accompli, it was unlikely to respond with force. Since Russia had struggled over the past decade to defeat a relatively small number of Chechen rebels in a Russian republic, he reckoned it would be reluctant to fight a sovereign state closely allied to the United States (see Gorbachev 2008, p. 29, Wood 2008, p. 3). Erroneously, he might also have hoped that a military response was less likely with a new man in the Kremlin, especially as Medvedev had tried to portray himself as more interested than his predecessor in human rights and international law (Vremya novostei, 11 August 2008, p. 1). But even if Russia did respond, Saakashvili calculated that any military action would be limited, as in the wars of the 1990s and, at a minimum, Georgia would be able quickly to re-establish the status quo ante in South Ossetia (Felgenhauer 2009, p. 162). Furthermore, it was hoped that if Moscow did indeed resort to force in South Ossetia, it would simply reveal to the world the militarist nature of the contemporary Russian state and convince any doubters in the West of the need to support Georgia and its closer integration into the West (Gorbachev 2008, p. 29).

Whatever Saakashvili’s calculations in launching the assault on Tskhinvali, it is clear he never expected such an overwhelming military response from Russia. Georgia’s Defence Minister, Batu Kutelia, admitted as much at the time (Garton Ash 2008, p. 31). Yet Moscow had made it plain since 2006 that if Georgia used force to take back the autonomous republics, it would not stand idly by (Tagliavini Commission, vol. 1, p. 30). Indeed, Georgia’s former Permanent Representative at the UN, Irakly Alasania, later criticized Saakashvili for his naivety in his dealings with Moscow. He accepted Saakashvili’s claim that he was simply responding to Russian provocations, but argued that the attack on Tskhinvali was still mistaken since it provided the Kremlin with the excuse it had long been looking for to attack Georgia and undermine its sovereignty (Kommersant, 26 December 2008, p. 12).

**US policy failure**

Georgia faced a major defeat in its war with Russia. Eight hundred and fifty died in the conflict, including 238 Georgian and 162 South Ossetian civilians, and another 100,000 were made homeless as a result of the fighting. The cost to the Georgian economy was an estimated at US$1 billion, which coincidentally had been the projected defence budget for 2008 (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 2, pp. 223–225). Moreover, the military, which Saakashvili had spent the last four years building up with considerable Western aid, had been all but destroyed (Gahrton 2010, p. 196). Georgia was able to maintain its formal status as a sovereign state but it remained heavily dependent on Moscow economically and more vulnerable to Russian interference than before (Jones, 2009, p. 97). The West has provided economic aid to help with reconstruction but the chances of Georgia regaining its territorial integrity seemed more remote than before the war, as Saakashvili himself admitted almost a year later (Kommersant, 21 July 2009, p. 1). In part, this was because the West had become more suspicious of Saakashvili as his responsibility for the war had become clearer.

The US position on Georgia, however, formally remained the same after Bush left office. President Obama talked about re-setting relations with Russia, but Vice-President Joe Biden, a long-time friend of Saakashvili, visited Tbilisi in July 2009 to emphasize this did not mean abandoning Georgia. Instead, Biden reiterated America’s support for Georgian territorial integrity and said Washington would not recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, he re-stated America’s opposition to their re-integration by force. NATO membership also remained on the table, but Biden indicated that there would be no urgency in re-opening the issue of the MAP (Vremya novostei, 24 July 2009). In fact, NATO had reported that the Georgian military after the war was of ‘minimal combat value’ (Nezavisimaya gazeta,
10 September 2008, p. 1), undermining the country’s worth to the alliance even if its strategic importance remained unaffected. Indeed, NATO’s Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, indicated a general shift in policy by the end of the year when he announced that NATO would stall the membership process with Georgia and Ukraine and move towards ‘a conditional and graduated re-engagement with Russia’ (the Guardian, 3 December 2008, p. 24).

Moscow, for its part, has sought to present the war as a victory for Russia. In many respects this is true. Its influence in the South Caucasus has been consolidated and Moscow has taken some pride from standing up to the Americans. President Medvedev later said that the war proved that the Russian military had regained its combat capability and its ability to defend regions of ‘privileged interest’ (Izvestiya, 6 November 2008, p. 1). There were, however, reasons for Moscow feeling they had not achieved everything they wanted. First, Moscow had hoped that Saakashvili would be overthrown or forced to step down from office. In part, because of Western support, this never happened. Saakashvili has been weakened by the war and opposition to his government has grown, but to date he has been able to survive. Second, Moscow’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has not provided the positive results hoped for. Other states have not followed suit and this has left the two republics more isolated than ever. Independence was intended to settle the dispute once and for all, but the republics can still be categorized as being amongst a number of frozen conflicts on the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Finally, there is a belief that Moscow won on the battlefield, but lost the propaganda war. Certainly, the world has become more wary of Russia’s growing economic and military power and its apparent willingness to use it for unilateral advantage. Russian nationalists may not be over-concerned by such Western fears, but even in purely pragmatic terms such a negative perception may have a detrimental impact on Moscow. For Russia’s actions have alienated not only the West, but also the publics in many Soviet successor states. This may have the effect of pushing them towards the West, even though Georgia and most other states of the former Soviet Union remain heavily dependent on Russia for energy, investment and trade. Such a possibility must be viewed as a major failure of Russian policy.

Such thoughts can provide little consolation for the West, however. For it is difficult to see Western policy in Georgia in terms other than failure. For neither the US nor Europe was able to prevent the war in the Caucasus. There were, of course, limits to what the West could reasonably be expected to do in a conflict generated primarily by relations between Tbilisi and its minorities. However, it has been argued by some, on the one hand, that a more assertive policy towards the region could have averted the war. The Europeans were perceived by such critics to be particularly culpable in their willingness to appease the Russians. According to one commentator, the EU was even reluctant to send a border mission to the Caucasus Mountains for fear of alienating Moscow. Such passivity, Nicu Popescu (2009, pp. 3–5) concluded, did not represent a policy. Saakashvili also expressed his disappointment at Europe’s opposition to Georgia’s membership of NATO at the Bucharest summit in April 2008. For Saakashvili believed that only a closer embrace of Georgia by NATO and the West could have provided an effective deterrence against Russian aggression (US Embassy Cables 2007). Although it seemed Georgia was as much the aggressor as victim, proponents of this view have emphasized the fact that Russia had long been preparing for war with Georgia, and South Ossetia simply provided the opportunity (Smith 2009, p. 126, Asmus 2010, p. 49). Even if true, the proposed strategy was likely to fail. In the past when Russia was weaker, NATO membership might have provided some form of deterrence. Against a more powerful Russia, however, the outcome was always more unpredictable.

Indeed, the level of American support for Tbilisi, however limited it might have been in practice, proved sufficient to entice Saakashvili into taking the enormous risk of launching a
war against South Ossetia. Saakashvili’s reading of American policy intentions may have proved tragically misguided, but it was not entirely fanciful. For, at a time of growing tension between Georgia and Russia, the Bush administration gave unequivocal backing to President Saakashvili. Instead of cooling passions in Tbilisi, Washington stoked them. As Saakashvili prepared for war, the US trained Georgian troops, provided military equipment, conducted military exercises on Georgian territory and lobbied hard for Georgia to become a member of NATO. Although Washington always emphasized its opposition to the use of force, Bush did not retract his support when his will was apparently defied. On the contrary, Washington continued to support Saakashvili after the assault on Tskhinvali. Indeed, Dick Cheney declared a few days after the war had started that ‘Russian aggression must not go unanswered’ (the Guardian, 12 August 2008, p. 5).

In practice, the West found it was severely constrained in what it could practically do. There was some discussion of economic sanctions and boycotting the Winter Olympics in 2014 at nearby Sochi, but there was little appetite even for such limited gestures. In any case, Europe’s growing dependence on Russian energy meant that any putative sanctions were likely to hurt the West at least as much as Moscow. There was disruption to relations with the EU and NATO, but it was short-lived. By the end of the year, Russia–NATO Council sessions had been resumed as had the EU dialogue with Moscow over energy and security issues. Russia had re-emerged under Putin as a significant regional power and there was nothing the US could do to prevent this.

Ronald Asmus declared that Washington had three immediate aims when the war broke out. First, to stop the fighting as soon as possible and limit Moscow’s tactical gains on the ground; second, to prevent Russia overthrowing the Saakashvili administration; and third, to ‘make it clear to Moscow that it would pay a price for its actions [and] to deter Moscow from any temptation to embark on similar adventures in the future’ (Asmus 2010, p. 177). In fact, Washington failed in all these aims, except indirectly in preventing the overthrow of the increasingly unpopular Saakashvili government. In practice, Washington’s embrace of Tbilisi meant it was unable to act as a neutral mediator when the war broke out. It was left to the EU to negotiate an end to the war. No leading US official visited Moscow during the crisis. In fact, it was Sarkozy’s diplomacy rather than Bush’s rhetoric which saved Saakashvili’s presidency and ultimately stopped the West’s relations with Russia from descending to cold-war levels once again. It also provided the foundation for Barack Obama’s later, largely successful, attempt to re-set relations with Moscow. A further problem for Washington was that its backing of Tbilisi meant that a local defeat for Georgia became what Stephen Blank (2009, p. 104) called, ‘a resounding strategic defeat for the West’. America’s outspoken support for Saakashvili indicated that Washington had a stake in the outcome of the war, but the White House never had any intention of intervening in any meaningful way against the Russians in the Caucasus. However, when Moscow showed itself willing to use force, the outcome was never in doubt. It seemed that Moscow had challenged the US and prevailed. On the other hand, Washington appeared unwilling to act effectively to defend its allies on the territory of the former Soviet Union. This fact led to some concern in Moldova and Ukraine which, like Georgia, also contained pro-Russian national republics with secessionist ambitions. This was the exact reverse of the message which Bush had intended.

Bush’s policies in Georgia antagonized Moscow and ultimately proved counter-productive. His policies sought to weaken Russia in order to increase American influence in the Southern Caucasus. In practice, the strategy endangered Western interests. In fact, democracy promotion and support for the Saakashvili administration helped destabilize the region. Only Barack Obama’s greater willingness to accept existing power realities has enabled relations between the US and Russia to improve. Soviet successor states cannot escape the presence of Russia
and the West cannot prevent the re-emergence of Russia as a great power. Western interests will be better served if such facts are recognized. In turn, if Russia wishes to maintain its influence in the space of the former Soviet Union in the longer term and ultimately not to repeat its experience in Eastern Europe at the end of the cold war, it should review its policies towards its near neighbours and consider more fully the virtues of soft over hard power.

Notes

1. According to the 1989 census, 93% of Ajaria was made up ethnic Georgians; 18% of Abkhazia was made up of ethnic Abkhazians; 45% were Georgian and 14% Russian; in South Ossetia, 66% were Ossetian and 29% were Georgian. The percentages in Abkhazia changed dramatically after the war of 1992–93 when approximately 250,000 Georgians (almost half of the population) were forced out of the autonomous republic. By 2008, Georgians made up only about 20% of the population (Tagliavini Commission 2009, vol. 2, pp. 64–65).

2. In an opinion poll in 2007, 92% of Georgians favoured negotiations to resolve the impasse with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but 60% were opposed to ‘autonomous status’ for the republics (see George 2008, p. 1164).

3. In official statements, Russia declared that the overthrow of Saakashvili was not a war aim, but the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, indicated the opposite in a private conversation with Condoleezza Rice (Asmus 2010, p. 198). The Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitali Churkin, also implied that it would be better for Georgia if Saakashvili resigned (the Guardian, 11 August 2008, p. 1).

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