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Russia's Response to Georgia's Military Operation in South Ossetia¹

Having declared a unilateral ceasefire on 7 August 2008, Georgia launched a large-scale military offensive on the night from 7 to 8 August on the sleeping city of Tskhinvali, the capital of the de facto independent territory of South Ossetia. Even though military provocations from both sides have been more or less constant – differing only in the level of escalation – they intensified throughout 2008. In order to “restore the constitutional order”,² the Georgian army launched a large-scale military operation, during which it bombarded targets with heavy artillery and Grad rocket launchers. Many non-military buildings were destroyed, and there were many victims among the civilian population. Russia sent troops in response to this crisis, and after several days the Georgian army was forced out of Tskhinvali as a result of Russia's “peacekeeping operation to force Georgia to peace”.³ According to official Russian explanations, in order to force the “regime” of Mikhail Saakashvili to peace and to prevent possible counterattacks, the Russian army had to strike key military objectives throughout Georgia, including airports and railways, thus sending its “peacekeepers” much further into Georgian territory. However, “peace enforcement” operations always produce civilian victims and human-rights abuses.

In this short description, I intentionally leave out the exact timelines of military actions, numbers of buildings destroyed, displaced persons, refugees, and killed and injured on all sides involved, as it would take much more time to objectively and precisely assess the situation than is possible at the time of writing.

After this crisis, the events developed as follows. On 12 August, a ceasefire plan was endorsed by President Dmitry Medvedev and the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, which was signed by Georgia on 15 August and by Russia on 16 August.⁴ On 20 August, the US and Poland signed an agreement to place a US missile defence base in Poland. On 26 August, the Russian president signed decrees on the recognition by the Russian Federation of

1 The author thanks Emma Hauer for providing valuable research support.

2 President Mikhail Saakashvili, cited in: Uwe Klussman, The Story of Tskhinvali's Resistance, in: *Spiegel Online*, 26 August 2008, at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,574516,00.html>.

3 Cf. *Stenogramma vistupleniya i otvetov na voprosi SMI Ministra inostrannikh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova* [Shorthand Record of Statement and Answers to Questions from the Mass Media by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S. V. Lavrov], Moscow, 13 August 2008, at: <http://www.mid.ru>.

4 The text of the peace plan can be found at: General Affairs and External Relations Council, Brussels, 13 August 2008, pp. 6-7, at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/102338.pdf.

South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence, after the leaders of these two republics and their parliaments once again appealed to their Russian counterparts to do this. On 17 September, Russia signed friendship treaties with both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which was also involved in the conflict, and Russian representatives declared that a military base would be established in Abkhazia in response to the invitation of its de facto president. There is speculation that if NATO does not agree to give Georgia a concrete prospect of membership – the Membership Action Plan – in December 2008 at its summit, the US will establish a military base in Georgia on a bilateral basis. Thus, it is possible to assume that this spiral of provocation, in which Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia, the US, and the EU are involved, will continue to grow.

This article rejects from the outset conspiracy theories that claim that Russia prepared this war long ago and that its troops were already in or on the way to Tskhinvali before Georgia launched its attack on South Ossetia. It also rejects conspiracy theories that claim that the US encouraged President Saakashvili to take the decision to resolve the “frozen” conflict with South Ossetia by violent means in order to free its path into NATO. These two main conspiracy theories and other speculations of this kind were spread in the US, European, and Russian mass media. Such theories are currently finding much fertile soil, because a great deal remains to be clarified at the time of writing: Why Georgia took the decision to bombard Tskhinvali, especially given that in the evening on the 7 August it declared a unilateral ceasefire; what role NATO aspirations played; how well the President of Georgia – Mikhail Saakashvili – controlled his military forces; why Russia did not prevent Georgia's military operation and did not stop its own military operation after Georgian forces were pushed out from Tskhinvali; and what role Russian-US or even Russian-NATO disagreements (in particular on further NATO enlargement, which could include Georgia and Ukraine among others) played in predetermining the way that Russia responded to Georgia's military operation. Both main sides of the conflict – Georgia and Russia – have accused each other of genocide, of carrying out “*zachistki*” (“cleansings”) of civilians, and of military crimes. The rhetorical and “informational” war between Georgia and Russia clearly demonstrates what Bismarck meant when he said that people never lie so much as after a hunt, during a war, or before an election.

This article focuses on Russia's response as explained by its official representatives, the reaction of the Russian mass media and the public discussions that took place, and the opinion of the population, as demonstrated by recent opinion polls. Additionally, it provides an overview of Russia's interests in the region, its motives for action, and background factors that could have played their role in determining how Russia responded during this crisis. The historical determinants and development of the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia and Abkhazia and Georgia will, however, not be

considered, as much has already been written on this subject.⁵ The main aim is to present the reader with the way this situation was seen in Russia. The final section draws some general conclusions regarding the Russian response to Georgia's military operation in South Ossetia and presents some general assessments of developments following the official ceasefire between Russia and Georgia.

Russia's Official Position

At first, Russia explained the need to conduct a "peacekeeping operation to enforce Georgia to peace" in terms of the latter's act of "genocide" in South Ossetia.⁶ In the words of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev: "Our main mission was to prevent a humanitarian disaster and save the lives of people for whom we are responsible, all the more so as many of them are Russian citizens."⁷ As the international community did not find the "genocide" argument convincing, Russian officials later referred to Chapter 51 of the UN Charter and argued that because Russian citizens suffered and Russian peacekeepers⁸ were attacked, Russia's operation was conducted with the purpose of self-defence. Russian forces not only moved into Tskhinvali to bring an end to the violence there, but they also entered Georgian territory "to suppress the Georgian military's aggressive designs".⁹ In spite of the large scale of the operation, however, Russia does not consider itself to be a party to the conflict.¹⁰

President Medvedev explained Russia's sequential recognition of independence of first South Ossetia and then Abkhazia, by saying that Russia was "obliged to recognize their independence after people were killed [...] this step was the only way we could prevent further bloodshed, prevent further escalation of the conflict, and to prevent the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians [...]" The second reason is that every people has a right to self-

5 See, for example, Bruno Coppieters et al. (eds), *Europeanization and Conflict Resolution – Case Studies from the European Periphery*, Ghent 2004.

6 See, for example, President Medvedev's interview with BBC Television, Sochi, 26 August 2008, at: http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b4325699005bcbb3/3705d761711f0f26c32574b20022cf83?OpenDocument.

7 Ibid.

8 In 1991, a military conflict ignited between the Georgian army and South Ossetian forces. In 1992, a ceasefire was agreed, and the Joint Control Commission (JCC) was established to observe the implementation of the ceasefire agreement. The JCC consists of representatives of Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia, and North Ossetia. The JCC is in charge of a peacekeeping force, which also consists of representatives of these four parties (but in practice of just two of them – Georgia and Russia).

9 Interview with BBC Television, cited above (Note 6).

10 *Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov Commentary on the Speech of British Foreign Secretary David Miliband in Kyiv on 27 August 2008*, Document 1254-27-08-2008, at: http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/09EEF4DE1D8FDD4BC32574B4001E8521.

determination.”¹¹ After Georgia attacked South Ossetia, representatives of the Russian military claimed that they had found evidence that Georgia had had similar plans to attack Abkhazia. The State Duma and the Council of Federation voted to recognize the independence of the two republics without any objections nor reservations. Even politicians who are usually more critical of the Kremlin approved the policy of President Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

In general, Russia’s explanations based on international law were neither consistent nor convincing. This is why one may assume that Russia’s response had deeper grounds. In fact, we have already heard similar explanations – in particular “genocide” – regarding the “peace enforcement” operation in relation to Kosovo in 1999. While, in the years since the NATO military operation in Yugoslavia, Russia rejected the use of force and the interference in the internal affairs of another state and insisted on prioritizing international law, the organs of the UN and its decision-making processes, and the principle of territorial integrity, it is conspicuous that Russia used the same rhetoric that applied in the case of Kosovo (“genocide,” “peace enforcement”) to justify its own actions the case of South Ossetia. The parallel to Kosovo became even more clear with Russia’s recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In an answer to a BBC journalist, who asked Medvedev, “But when the West recognized Kosovo you were opposed and said it went against international law, and now you are doing exactly the same thing. Is this not hypocritical behaviour?”, the Russian President said: “This is absolutely normal behaviour. My colleagues said to me on many occasions that Kosovo is a special case, *casus sui generis*, as lawyers say. OK, if Kosovo is a special case, this is also a special case.”¹² Therefore, while Russia had previously held a strong position of adherence to the existing principles of international law – of non-intervention and territorial integrity – it suddenly acted in a way that was no longer in accordance with the principles it has been defending.

This contradiction can be explained by the fact that even though Russia was proclaiming these principles, its opinion was nevertheless ignored on many important occasions. In particular, its position was neglected in 1999, when NATO intervened in Yugoslavia to end ethnic and political repression,¹³ but it was also neglected in early 2008, when many of the leading Western European states (including the UK, France, and Germany) and the

11 President Medvedev’s interview with CNN, Sochi, 26 August 2008, at: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/08/26/2040_type82915type82916_205785.shtml.

12 Interview with BBC Television, cited above (Note 6).

13 This was reflected in the new national security concept adopted by the Russian Federation in 2000: “[...] a number of states are stepping up efforts to weaken Russia politically, economically, militarily and in other ways. Attempts to ignore Russia’s interests when solving major issues of international relations, including conflict situations, are capable of undermining international security, stability, and the positive changes achieved in international relations.” *2000 National Security Concept of the Russian Federation*, at: <http://www.russiaeurope.mid.ru/russiastrat2000.html>.

US recognized the independence of Kosovo after Kosovo proclaimed itself independent in February, despite Russia's objections. Moreover, the hostilities launched by President Saakashvili in South Ossetia are indeed "a special case", as, following the first escalations in the 1990s, most of the "frozen" conflicts in the CIS space have remained "frozen", i.e. no leader of a CIS country has tried to unite a breakaway de facto independent republic by force, especially not applying the kind of force that was used by the Georgian army. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine that after this attack on Tskhinvali the population of South Ossetia – and that of Abkhazia – could ever trust Georgia again. In the words of Sergey Lavrov: "And Mr. Saakashvili, by using armed force against the people whom he, according to his statement, considered a part of his people, has just definitely and conclusively settled this issue."¹⁴ Thus, Russia has actually acknowledged reality by recognizing the independence of these two republics. This reality is that there are de facto states, which have been existing independently of their "mother" country and which do not want to unite with it.

Both Russia's decision to intervene in the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia (especially the way it intervened) and its decision to recognize the independence of the two republics were strongly criticized by the leaders of the US and the EU. According to US President George W. Bush, "Georgia has become a courageous democracy [...] The people of Georgia have cast their lot with the free world, and we will not cast them aside [...] Unfortunately, Russia has tended to view the expansion of freedom and democracy as a threat to its interests."¹⁵ The US position is that "Russia has invaded a sovereign neighboring state and threatens a democratic government elected by its people [...] And these actions jeopardize Russians' relations – Russia's relations with the United States and Europe."¹⁶ NATO's position was that its members "remain concerned by Russia's actions during this crisis [...] especially in light of continuing reports of Russia's deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure. Russian military action has been disproportionate and inconsistent with its peacekeeping role, as well as incompatible with the principles of peaceful conflict resolution set out in the Helsinki Final Act, the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the Rome Declaration [...] We have determined that we cannot continue with business as usual."¹⁷ Both NATO and EU states consider Russia's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to be in direct violation of Georgia's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The presidents of Estonia, Lithuania,

14 Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, cited above (Note 10).

15 The White House, *President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia*, 15 August 2008, at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/ews/releases/008/08/20080815.html>.

16 The White House, *President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia*, 11 August 2008, at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080811-1.html>.

17 NATO, Press Release (2008)104, 19 August 2008, *Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the Level of Foreign Ministers held at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, on 19 August 2008*, at: <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-104e.html>.

and Poland and the prime minister of Latvia visited Georgia to express their “full support to its democratically elected President” and underlined their full support for the “territorial integrity of Georgia” and “the need to withdraw of occupation military troops from Georgia”.¹⁸ But, in general, the EU and its representatives tried to adopt a more balanced approach than that of the US. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner insisted that “the EU must take a balanced position on the crisis in Georgia, adopting a firm stance while keeping channels of communication open”.¹⁹ At the same time, the EU decided to intensify its support to Georgia.

In response to the Western critique of Russia’s decision to recognize the independence of the two breakaway republics, Russian Prime Minister Putin argued as follows: “When the Soviet Union was formed, these territories, by Stalin’s decision were definitively given to Georgia [...] Therefore, those who insist that those territories must continue to belong to Georgia are Stalinists: They defend the decision of Josef Vissarionovich Stalin.”²⁰ Furthermore, he explained, “we don’t like what’s been happening, but we did not provoke this situation [...] in recent years our U.S. partners have been cultivating the rule of force instead of the rule of international law. When we tried to stop the decision on Kosovo; no one listened to us. We said, don’t do it, wait; you are putting us in a terrible position in the Caucasus. What shall we say to the small nations of the Caucasus as to why independence can be gained in Kosovo but not here? [...] But who opened Pandora’s box? Did we do it? No, we didn’t do it. It was not our decision, and it was not our policy.”²¹

In many interviews, the official representatives of the Russian Federation explicitly or implicitly blamed the US for having supported Georgia, which, according to them, had encouraged Saakashvili to attack Tskhinvali on 8 August. For example, Putin recalled that, throughout the 1990s and afterwards, “the other side – I am referring to the Georgian side – with the support of the United States, violated all the agreements [concerning South Ossetia and Abkhazia] in the most brazen way”.²² Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov stated: “Know how his [Saakashvili’s] western backers, London included, used to forgive him everything and not only in what he was doing to the South Ossetians and Abkhaz [...] but they also used to forgive him for the dispersals of demonstrations, the brutal restrictions on

18 *Statement by the Presidents of Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and the Prime Minister of Latvia on the further conflict resolution in Georgia*, Warsaw, 12 August 2008, at: <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/ireland/news/press-releases/template/?pg=10747>.

19 European Parliament, *MEPs Debate the situation in Georgia*, 1 September 2008, at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=EN&type=IM-PRESS&reference=20080829IPR35626>.

20 Transcript: CNN Interview with Vladimir Putin, 29 August 2008, at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/29/putin.transcript/index.html#cnnSTCText>.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

opposition activities, and the shutdown of opposition media.”²³ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also issued the following comments: “[...] we, naturally, cannot fail to consider also the fact that, over recent years while pumping Georgia up with arms Washington kept assuring us that those steps were not directed against Russia. The real worth of such assurances becomes even more obvious now when thousands of people in South Ossetia, including Russian peacekeepers, have been killed or injured in South Ossetia”.²⁴ The US and NATO ships that appeared in the region after the hostilities stopped were suspected of delivering arms to Georgia.²⁵ US military aid to Georgia “had rather encouraged the irresponsible and unpredictable regime [Saakashvili’s] as it proceeded along the road of gambles”.²⁶

These mutual incriminations demonstrate that the crisis in South Ossetia has reflected and deepened the problems that have accumulated in relations between Russia and the West. These problems concern not only the different approaches of Russia and the West to the post-Soviet region, but also their bilateral problems – the Cold War legacies of mistrust, misunderstandings, and suspicions – but also the increasing competition for influence and power in international relations, gaps and areas lacking clarity in international law, and uncertainties regarding the status and long-term prospects of Russian-Western relations and the international security system. Russia’s relations with the West, particularly with the US, became especially tense after the Western states started consultations on punitive sanctions *vis-à-vis* Russia.

The whole situation may therefore be described as a spiral of confrontation. After the Georgian army, trained by NATO and the US military, in particular, and armed according to NATO standards, attacked one of the protégés of the Russian Federation – South Ossetia – and Russia responded by moving into Georgian territory, and just a few days after the six-point peace plan was signed, and despite the US threatening Russia with sanctions, Poland and the US signed the agreement to place a US missile-defence base in Poland. Russia had criticized these plans on many occasions. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that “the timing of the signing of the American-Polish agreement, affecting the security of many European states, was not accidental. We have taken notice of the remarks of Polish officials that the events in the Caucasus have hastened Poland’s decision to go ahead with the deal”.²⁷ Just a few days after this agreement was signed, the Russian Federation recognized the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

23 Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, cited above (Note 10).

24 *Russian MFA Information and Press Department Commentary in Connection with Agreement to Deploy Elements of US Strategic Missile Defense System in Poland*, 20 August 2008, at: http://www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/f68cd37b84711611c3256f6d00541094/bcb38ee721895315c32574ac003fc65d?OpenDocument.

25 Cf. President Medvedev’s interview with BBC Television, cited above (Note 6).

26 Transcript of Speech by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov at the Foreign Ministry’s MGIMO University on the Occasion of the New Academic Year, 1 September 2008, at: http://www.norway.mid.ru/pr08-01_eng.html.

27 Russian MFA Information and Press Department, cited above (Note 24).

Moreover, after friendship treaties were signed with these two states on 17 September, Russia started to speak more openly about establishing a new military base or bases on the territories of the two republics, which it saw as independent. This step is directed more at the US – to counter its plans of establishing military bases in Romania and Bulgaria and a missile-defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic – than at the EU, which is seen as more neutral on this issue, as most of the EU states adhere to the position that dialogue with Russia has to be continued. The Russian leadership probably allowed Saakashvili's military operation to take place in order to demonstrate to the West that Georgia is not stable enough to be a member of NATO, but instead of criticizing Georgia, the Western governments criticized Russia. Only gradually did the Western leaders start to admit that Georgia was the aggressor in this situation. One may assume that if the West had taken a more balanced approach to assessing Russia's and Georgia's actions, Russia would not have gone as far as to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Even though Russia acted unilaterally in the case of South Ossetia (and Abkhazia), ignoring the opinion of the Western states regarding its actions, the enormous volume of interviews given by Russian official representatives to various representatives of the Western mass media nonetheless demonstrates that Russia wants to maintain constructive co-operation with the West.

Internal Presentation of Events in the Russian Mass Media

The first reaction in the Russian mass media to Georgia's military operation was one of shock. All the mass media reported and showed the victims of the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali, refugees fleeing to Russia, the destruction of the city – especially of civic infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and the university – and people describing horrible human-rights abuses committed by the Georgian army. The first reaction in both state-controlled media and the few independent mass-media outlets that exist in Russia was that the Russian leadership had no choice but to intervene in this situation. It was also a shock that Russia was at war, especially that it was at war with Georgia, a nation with whom Russia has had close ties. No one knew or predicted how long the war between Georgia and Russia could last.

Russia's intervention was presented as the right move – not from the point of view of international law – but primarily in terms of common sense, morality, and justice: A civil population close to Russia's territory was dying and desperate for help. In most discussions, it was stated that the majority of the South Ossetian population was Russian, but this barely even mattered; Russia had to interfere to save their lives in any case, especially since no other state or international power was willing to interfere with this situation. President Saakashvili was criticized by most pro-Kremlin and oppositional

journalists and politicians. Russian critical analysts compared his instigation of large-scale military aggression against South Ossetia to the way Putin tried to bring “order” to Chechnya in 1999.

While in the following days the state-controlled mass media continued to present the events in South Ossetia in these terms, the more critical media started to question the reliability and accuracy of the information presented by pro-Kremlin TV channels, whose correspondents received first-hand information from the conflict zone. Gradually, the critical media started to report on the victims among the civil population in the Georgian towns of Poti and Gori, who were suffering from the actions of the Russian military, and some representatives of the opposition, such as a former economic advisor to President Putin, appearing on the radio station *Echo Moskvi*, took a pro-Georgian position, arguing that it was Russia who was the aggressor, and that Georgia merely responded to Russian military action.

Russian critical journalists and political analysts in general argued that while Russia was right to intervene, it undermined the “legitimacy” of its actions by continuing into Georgian territory. They also asked questions such as the following: Did Russia really care for its citizens in South Ossetia, or was it more a move designed to show President Saakashvili his place, and, moreover, to show his supporters (in particular the US) their place and Russia’s power? Was Russia really unable to prevent the Georgian operation? Did Russian secret services not know about the preparations for this Georgian intervention? Furthermore, critical journalists and analysts noticed that through its military actions in Chechnya, Russia had undermined its “legitimacy” to speak of human rights. Lavrov accused the West of having tolerated Saakashvili’s “escapades”, including “authoritarian tendencies within the country – the suppression of the opposition, of opposition media, the dispersal of demonstrators, election manipulations”,²⁸ but all these “escapades” have also been present in Russian political life during Putin’s presidency and since.

One more point of criticism was the problems and instability in the Russian North Caucasus. While they have remained unsolved, Russia decided to invest resources and finances in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is also unclear how loyal the presidents of the two republics are to Russia.

One more subject, frequently discussed in both state-controlled and critical mass media, was the – anti-Russian – way the events were presented in the Western mass media. While Russia won the military campaign by attacking military targets throughout Georgia, Georgia was winning the “informational” war. Several programmes on pro-Kremlin Channel 1 and Russia TV went even further, explaining that Western hatred towards Russia had

28 *Transcript of Remarks and Response to Media Questions by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov*, Sochi, 26 August 2008, available at: http://www.ln.mid.ru/BRP_4.NSF/f68cd37b84711611c3256f6d00541094/1ea7f31a718b3783c32574b30042c162?OpenDocument.

existed for centuries, and the way the events were assessed by Western leaders and mass media was just one manifestation of this hatred. This view of the West as anti-Russian was strengthened by the fact that even after Georgia bombed Tskhinvali, and after Saakashvili blocked all Russian broadcasts in Georgia to prevent the Georgian population from receiving critical assessments of his actions, many of the EU and NATO states continued to reiterate that Georgia was a “courageous democracy”.

As far as the recognition of independence is concerned, critical journalists and representatives of the opposition regretted the timing of this decision, seeing it as one more ring in a spiral of confrontation with the US, and warned of the political and economic consequences it might have for Russia – potentially even leading to isolation. As an analyst on *Echo Moskvi* commented, the country of Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky had found new friends for itself in Hamas, Cuba, and Nicaragua, who also recognized the independence of South Ossetia. Not one of Russia’s allies in the CIS has followed Russia’s example. At the same time, however, even critical journalists and analysts admitted that South Ossetia and Abkhazia had been de facto independent since the 1990s, and Russia was just being honest about the situation.

While the state-controlled mass media explained that the West was unable to impose any effective punitive sanctions on Russia because the Western states would suffer from these sanctions themselves given the interdependence of the West and Russia in many areas, the critical mass media recognized that the only effective tool the West could use would be the kind of measures applied in the case of Belarus: to refuse to give visas to Russian policy makers and to freeze their assets and bank accounts abroad. But the critical media also saw that the West would not take such measures, because Russia is not Belarus, and the West, especially the EU, depends on Russia in many areas, particularly energy.

In sum, even though the official point of view dominated the presentation of events in the Russian mass media, nevertheless, it was possible to hear and read critical opinions and debates.

The Opinions of the Russian Population on the Situation in Georgia

The previous section has demonstrated that different positions (including the Georgian stance) were presented in the Russian mass media and – very emotional – debates between the representatives of contrary opinions took place, nevertheless, it should be noticed that the majority of the Russian population receives information only via the state-controlled TV channels. While critical and objective journalists and analysts also have their public, it remains in the minority. Bearing this in mind, there is an overall consensus in Russian society regarding the assessment of the events in Georgia in August 2008.

Fifty per cent of those polled by the Levada-Center think that they understand very well what has happened in South Ossetia.²⁹ According to another opinion poll foundation, VTSIOM, 76 per cent are very well aware of the tragic events there, and 83 per cent described the escalation of conflict as “a large-scale military conflict or even a war.”³⁰ As the following tables³¹ demonstrate, the majority of the population sees the actions and policies of the US and NATO and of Georgia as the main sources of destabilization of the situation.

<i>What do you think was the main reason for the conflict in South Ossetia?</i>	
The Georgian government’s policy has been discriminatory towards the South Ossetian and Abkhaz populations.	32
The leaderships of the unrecognized republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are trying to hold on to power by constantly provoking tension.	5
The government of the Russian Federation uses the policy of “divide and rule” to maintain its influence in the Caucasus.	5
The US government aims to spread its influence to the countries neighbouring Russia.	49
No answer	10

<i>Why do you think Georgia has tried to use force in relation to South Ossetia?</i>	
This was an attempt to restore the territorial integrity of the country.	15
Georgia was tired of attacks and provocations from South Ossetia.	4
In order to become a member of NATO, Georgia has to resolve its territorial problems.	43
Saakashvili initiated this action in order to strengthen his authority in Georgia and hold on to the position of President.	38
No answer/Other reasons	13

Both VTSIOM and Levada polls found that two-thirds of the Russian population agree that the Russian government had to intervene in the situation and that it had done everything to prevent the escalation of conflict and bloodshed. The majority of the population also approved of Russia’s recognition of

29 Cf. *Mnenie Rossiyan o konflikte v Gruzii: opros 15-18 avgusta* [The opinion of the Russians on the conflict in Georgia: Opinion Poll on 15-18 August], Levada-Centre, 21 August 2008, at: <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008082100.html>.

30 Cf. *Tragediya v Yuzhnoy Osetii: kto vinovat?* [The Tragedy in South Ossetia: Whose Fault Is This?], VTSIOM, Press Release No. 1021, 14 August 2008, at: http://wciom.ru/arkhiv/tematicheskii-arkhiv/item/single/10500.html?no_cache=1&c Hash=abf66aef62.

31 *Mnenie Rossiyan o konflikte v Gruzii*, cited above (Note 29).

South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Moreover, 40 per cent are convinced that Russia will benefit from it.³²

Seventy-three per cent of the population in general approves of Medvedev's actions as the President of Russia, and 83 per cent approves of the activities of Prime Minister Putin.³³ Putin's popularity rating has remained higher than Medvedev's. If the mass media devoted more coverage to President Medvedev and less to Prime Minister Putin before the conflict (i.e. in June and July), Putin "returned" to Russian TV screens after the escalation of conflict in Georgia. Forty-nine per cent of the population think that Medvedev and Putin share power equally, while 26 per cent think that state power is in the hands of Putin, and 14 per cent that it is Medvedev who is the real leader of Russia.³⁴ But even if there are different opinions among the Russian population regarding the question of who has the real power in the country, 86 per cent of those polled describe Medvedev's policy as one of continuity.³⁵

Finally, according to the Levada poll, 66 per cent of the Russian population thinks that the Western states have decided to support Georgia in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict because the West aims to weaken Russia and to push it out of this region.³⁶

The Background to Russia's Response

In order to understand Russia's reaction to the escalation of Georgia's conflict with South Ossetia, it is necessary to look beyond the events of August. Even though Russia explained its intervention in terms of the need to stop the bloodshed and to save Russian citizens, its interests in South Ossetia and Abkhazia did not emerge overnight from the 7th to the 8th of August. The fact that the majority of the population of both republics has acquired Russian passports during their period of de facto independence was not accidental. In a way Russia became a hostage of its own policy: Because its citizens were endangered, and because Saakashvili was attacking the protégé of Russian policy, Russia had to respond.

South Ossetia is not strategically important for Russia, and Russia has more interests in Abkhazia, which is located on the Black Sea. These regions have been important tourist destinations for Russian citizens. Abkhazia could become important for the transportation of energy from the Caspian Sea to

32 Cf. *Rossiyanе о situazii v Abkhazii i Yuzhnoy Osetii* [Russian citizens on the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia], Levada Centre, 22 September 2008, at: <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008092201.html>.

33 Cf. *Vliyaniye konflikta v Gruzii na rejtingi prezidenta i premera* [The influence of the Conflict in Georgia on the ratings of the president and of the prime minister], Levada Centre, 21 August 2008, at: <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008082102.print.html>.

34 Cf. *ibid.*

35 Cf. *ibid.*

36 Cf. *Mnenie Rossiyan о konflikte v Gruzii*, cited above (Note 29).

Russia and on to Europe, as Russia is trying to diversify the transit routes of the energy it delivers to the EU, and is trying to prevent the EU from implementing plans that aim to reduce dependence on Russia by diversifying energy sources and transportation routes.³⁷ In Abkhazia, Russia already had a military base at Gudauta, which it was to close down as a result of the commitments it undertook during the OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999, but these were never completely fulfilled. Because Russia considers Abkhazia to be a sovereign state, and because Abkhazia welcomes Russia's military presence on its territory, Gudauta may again be used as a Russian military base. A Russian military base in Abkhazia would have strategic significance, if the US or NATO were to establish military bases in Georgia. Moreover, Abkhazia and Russia have discussed whether the Russian Black Sea Fleet could be stationed there. This is especially important, given that Russia leases the main base for its Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, Ukraine, and the current Ukrainian government is not willing to prolong the relevant agreement after it expires in 2017.

Russia supported these two republics in the 1990s, because, while it was gradually losing its power over Georgia, it could use its influence on these two republics to achieve leverage over Western-oriented Georgia. While in 1993, Georgia agreed to participate in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty, which was designed to become a military union of the CIS states, in 1999, it did not renew its membership, while aspiring to join NATO. In 2003, Mikhail Saakashvili, a pro-Western politician, came to power as a result of the Rose Revolution.³⁸ Reuniting Georgia became one of his main policy priorities. Becoming a member of NATO was another. While Russian-NATO and especially Russian-US relations have been fraught in many areas, the transatlantic actors have been increasing their co-operation with Georgia. While the EU, seen as the "good" West in Russia,³⁹ has been rather passive in the region, Georgia has been intensifying its military co-operation with both

37 One of the most important of the EU's diversification projects, which is also supported by the US – the construction of the Nabucco pipeline, which would transport gas from the Caspian Sea and Central Asian regions, including Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, avoiding Russian territory – could be endangered, as the EU might not be able to secure the contracts to buy the Central Asian gas. In May 2007, the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan agreed to build a new trans-Caspian gas pipeline to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan to Europe along the Caspian Sea coast via Kazakhstan and Russia. More details on the Nabucco project can be found at the official Nabucco pipeline webpage: <http://www.nabucco-pipeline.com>. Georgia plays an important role in the EU's diversification attempts. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline with a capacity of one million barrels a day started to operate in 2005, transporting Kazakh oil to Europe while avoiding Russian territory.

38 Cf. Valerie J. Bunce/Sharon L. Wolchik, International Diffusion and Postcommunist Electoral Revolutions, in: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 3/2006: pp. 283-304; Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union*, Aldershot 2005.

39 Dmitry Danilov, Russia and European Security, in: Dov Lynch (ed.), *What Russia Sees*, Paris 2005, pp. 79-99, here: p. 87.

NATO and the US. Moreover, Nadezhda Arbatova notes that in supporting Georgia in its NATO aspirations, NATO has also accepted and even approved of the anti-Russian character of Georgia's Western tendencies. This had not strained relations with Russia.⁴⁰ To explain why Russia sees NATO and the US as the "bad" West, one may cite Andrei Tsygankov, who writes, "While lecturing Russia about importance of abandoning '19th-century geopolitical thinking,' the United States waged the war in the Balkans, initiated two rounds of NATO expansion, withdrew from the ABM Treaty, established a military presence in Central Asia [as well as military bases in Romania and Bulgaria], invaded Iraq, and announced plans to deploy elements of ballistic-missile defense in Eastern Europe."⁴¹ In addition, the US became very active throughout the CIS region.

In April 2008, at the Bucharest NATO summit, Georgia finally received a promise that it would be accepted into NATO one day, even though it did not gain the prize of entry into the Membership Action Plan (MAP): "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO [...] MAP is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership. Today we make clear that we support these countries' applications for MAP."⁴² One of the critiques directed at Georgia was that "countries that are themselves embroiled in regional or domestic conflicts cannot be members of NATO."⁴³ The issue of the MAP is to be addressed during the NATO summit in December 2008.

Russia has been reiterating that NATO's enlargement to include CIS states was unacceptable, and has criticized other steps taken by the US and NATO that it considered to be anti-Russian. According to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "on the whole, our cooperation with NATO is developing in a favorable political atmosphere. But it's a fragile thing. It may all turn out to be destroyed as a result of rash, ill-thought-out actions, linked, for example, to inviting certain CIS countries to join NATO. As before, we are convinced that the geographical expansion of NATO has no serious well-argued foundation."⁴⁴ Dmitry Medvedev has said that "no state can be

40 Interview by the author with Nadezhda Arbatova, Head of the Center of European Integration, Institute of World Economy and International Relations at the Russian Academy of Science, Moscow, October 2008.

41 Andrei Tsygankov, *The West Needs to Make up for Past Mistakes on Russia*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 27 August 2008.

42 NATO, Press Release (2008)049, 3 April 2008, *Bucharest Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008*, at: <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-049e.html>.

43 German Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel's speech at the 41st Commanders' Conference of the *Bundeswehr* in Berlin on 10 March 2008, at: http://www.bundesregierung.de/nn_1514/Content/DE/Bulletin/2008/03/23-2-bk-kommandeur.html (author's translation).

44 Alexander Yakovenko, *the Spokesman of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Answers Russian Media Questions Regarding Upcoming Meeting of Russia-NATO Council in Vilnius*, unofficial translation from the Russian, at: http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b4325699005bcbb3/2726d16b65b7aa99c3256fe900374fa5?OpenDocument.

pleased about having representatives of a military bloc to which it does not belong coming closer to its borders”.⁴⁵ Russian official representatives have warned that its policy in the CIS will become more assertive. As a consequence, Russia strengthened its ties with both Georgian separatist regions after April 2008.

In sum, Russia’s response to Georgia’s military operation in South Ossetia was also a response to the expansion of NATO and US influence in the area, which Russia perceives as its “traditional” zone of interests. As the Russian foreign minister said, “Saakashvili and those who stand behind him [...] had decided on testing Russian power for strength”.⁴⁶ As Tsygankov concludes: “Against its best intentions, the United States is pushing the Kremlin to take the harshest possible steps in defense of its perceived interests. The recent crisis in the Caucasus may be a prelude to a series of other crises in the former Soviet region.”⁴⁷

Conclusion

Even though different opinions exist in Russia on the situation around South Ossetia, it is possible to speak about a general consensus in Russian society and among Russian political elites that reflects the official position of the Russian Federation. The majority of the population approves of the decisions and actions of its official representatives in relation to South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The general consensus and approval of the foreign policy of the government has been formed and consolidated in Russia throughout the whole of Putin’s presidency, and it has especially strengthened in the last few years. The policy of the US and NATO has contributed to this consolidation, as Russia’s concerns about NATO enlargement plans and military bases in Eastern Europe, about the US missile defence system and future security architecture in Europe – in which Russia wants to be an active participant – have simply been dismissed. Russia’s relations with NATO and the US are simply not at a level that would allow Russia to believe that all these plans are not designed against it. Even if Russia tolerated developments it saw as negative in the past, it has been warning that it is no longer going to accept policies and actions that it perceives as anti-Russian, but these warnings and concerns have been and are again being neglected.

Even though Russia and the Western actors continue to co-operate on many issues and are interdependent in many ways, problems in Russian-Western relations are becoming more apparent and are being utilized in do-

45 Dmitry Medvedev, cited in: Salome Asatiani/Brian Whitmore, *Russia: Moscow Eases Sanctions on Georgia, but Rattles Sabers over NATO*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 March 2008, available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1051045.html>.

46 Speech by Sergey Lavrov, cited above (Note 26).

47 Tsygankov, cited above (Note 41).

mestic politics in both Russia and the West. The image of the inimical West has helped to consolidate the political situation in Russia during parliamentary and presidential elections, and, by the same token, the need to punish an evil and imperialistic Russia was an important theme in discussions during the 2008 US presidential election campaign. All these reasons explain why the support of the Russian population for the actions of its government in respect to South Ossetia is predetermined not only by concern for the suffering people, who are Russian citizens and were attacked by Saakashvili's regime, but also by the desire to show the US and NATO that Russia is no longer going to tolerate developments with which it disagrees. One must recall that a large proportion of those polled think that US (or even NATO) policy has directly or indirectly encouraged Saakashvili to try to resolve the longstanding conflict quickly by means of force.

The analysts, politicians, and journalists will continue to speculate on questions such as how the situation in South Ossetia came about, whether this scenario could be repeated in other regions, and who is at fault for what has happened.

Russia supported the two breakaway regions throughout the 1990s and after 2000, allowing and contributing, even if indirectly, to the provocations and tensions in the region. Even though it received some leverage over Georgia through its policy of supporting the separatist republics, it also became a hostage of its own policy and of the actions of the two presidents of the republics it has recently recognized. The leaders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have utilized Russian support to pursue their own objectives and profits. Their actions contributed to the overall tension in the region. Not only do doubts remain about the loyalty of these two leaders to Russia, but Russia found no real supporters of its policy even among its CIS partners. None of them has hurried to recognize South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence. Russia therefore needs to learn important lessons about the effectiveness of its policy in the CIS and the loyalty of its closest CIS partners. Moreover, it remains to be seen how Russia's policy in relation to the two separatist republics will affect its own unstable North Caucasus and other regions with ethnic tensions.

The government of Georgia, headed by Saakashvili, a young, energetic and pro-Western president, has interpreted Western support (especially the support of the NATO and of the US) as meaning that the West would condone and even support its craziest military actions. The Georgian government decided to play poker with the well-being of its own country. But the US and many NATO and EU states also have to think about why the Georgian government interpreted their support the way it did. It should also be noted that, while the US and NATO supported Georgia too strongly in the past, the EU has been rather passive in the region and was especially so in relation to this conflict.

Even though the escalation of the situation in South Ossetia has highlighted the problems in relations between Russia and the West, at the same time, Russia has not overthrown Saakashvili's regime, although it could have done so, again arguing that this was a situation analogous to the case of Yugoslavia. This might mean that Russia still values Western opinion and wants to avoid open confrontation with the NATO and EU states. While the Western states discussed the possibility of sanctions against Russia, they understood that there was not much they could do, and the EU opted for "open communication channels" with Russia. Russia needs the West, but, by the same token, the West needs Russia. The major international challenges and problems that both Russia and the West face can be solved only if the dialogue between them remains, and if, instead of further unrolling the spiral of provocations and confrontation, they take a more pragmatic approach, concentrating on areas of co-operation and working on building trust.