

Who Really Lost the Georgian War?

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The media coverage of Russia's recent military intervention in Georgia has been intense. Moscow justified its early August attack on its Caucasian neighbour as a "peace enforcement" operation and an attempt to protect Russian citizens living in the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. What is striking in many commentaries and analyses is the fact that they repeat the same odd assertion that, firstly, the US and the EU showed a weak resolve in responding to the Russian aggression, and, secondly, that Russia scored a political victory on the ruins of Georgian towns and villages. Instead of taking this simplistic approach, I would propose a more nuanced assessment of the outcome of that violent crisis to show that the opposite is more likely to be true.

The coverage of the Georgian war, both in mainstream media and among some political analysts, has been marred by a clear bias and singular narrow-mindedness. While the Western press was almost united in its condemnation of Russia, what was conspicuously missing for a long time was a decent analysis of the Georgian leadership's actions immediately preceding the outbreak of hostilities on 7 August 2008. Of course, it is very hard – and unnecessary – to justify Russia's aggression, but it would be of great service to today's public, as well as future historians, if President Saakashvili's reckless belief in the international community's *carte blanche*, which drew the easily provoked Russian Army into a military confrontation, was properly registered and thoroughly analysed.

Furthermore, reading many of the commentaries regarding the Western response, one might easily be confused and think that Georgia was already a NATO member. But it is not, and the US and its European allies had no legal obligation to come to its rescue by attacking Russia and risking a full-scale war with all its consequences. However, short of such an attack the West responded unambiguously by signalling that the "business as usual" approach was no longer an option. Renewed talk of speeding up efforts to diversify Western energy supplies will be keenly registered in Moscow, especially since oil prices have been falling. It may not have been useful for most of the Soviet era, yet today the West can reasonably hope that economic pressure will suffice to dissuade Russia from persistent violation of international norms.

Finally, many commentators failed to acknowledge the EU's efforts to mediate between the two sides of the conflict as a sign of progress in its shaky common foreign and security policy. Compared to the war in Lebanon in 2006 when the EU looked to the UN to broker a ceasefire – although that conflict also took place in their neighbourhood – the EU's reaction was swift this time around. The President-in-Office of the European Council (Nicolas Sarkozy) was in Moscow within five days with a six-point plan. Even more impressively, both sides signed it (although Russia has been heavily criticised for not having fully complied with it). Partly for that reason, President Sarkozy, along with the EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso and the EU foreign policy Chief Javier Solana, met with President Medvedev again on 8 September. Of course, the EU is still far from having a truly common foreign policy, and differences among EU states will not vanish overnight, but the EU's collective reaction to the Russo-Georgian conflict shows that some important gaps are being bridged.

Most importantly, the EU has employed its best weapon – a strategic pact that allows its partners to enjoy a privileged commercial and political status in their interactions with the bloc. Meeting in Brussels in early September, the heads of state and government showed a remarkable unity: even Germany agreed to a strong statement condemning Russia's use of force and its recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They also called on other states not to follow its example. Crucially, however, the leaders unanimously agreed to suspend any negotiations on a new partnership agreement until Russia complies with the ceasefire. Russia's President and Prime Minister predictably mocked the move by claiming that it would hurt the EU more. This kind of arrogance is likely to be a façade, however, because Russia's policy-makers cannot possibly fail to understand that commercial links with the EU are Russia's economic lifeline, and if that is the case in a period of high energy prices, it will be even more true when they decline. Access to the EU marketplace is crucial to the survival of Russia's economy, and like other troublesome countries in recent years, such as Serbia, it will come to play by the rules of the Euro-Atlantic community when it realizes this simple fact.

It is also instructive to take a closer look at the difference between Russia's objectives when it engaged militarily with Georgia and what it achieved in reality. The escalation was about much more than 'protecting' the two breakaway regions. Russia initiated the intervention with several related goals in mind. It set out to intimidate Georgia (and, by extension, Ukraine) into renouncing their aspirations to join NATO. By the same token, it hoped to cause the Alliance to reconsider its open door policy, in particular the Membership Action Plan (MAP) that will be up for a vote again in December 2008. NATO members will see what can happen when Russia is needlessly provoked – the reasoning apparently went - and they will slam the door shut on the Caucasus, and any other former Soviet republics which might entertain similar ambitions, before it is too

late. Secondly, it counted on exploiting traditional divisions between NATO and EU's so-called 'hardliners,' such as the UK and some Central European states, and the 'appeasers' such as Germany or Italy. Finally, the Russian leadership wanted to force Poland, the Czech Republic, and the United States to scrap the plan to locate a part of the US missile defence system in Central Europe. This was intended to prove that Russia is back in business of being a superpower and has, in a truly cold-war fashion, a clearly defined and separate sphere of influence upon which the West should not encroach.

So what has been the response of Russia's target audience? In condemning Moscow's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushenko warned the West that "any country could be next"¹ and reconfirmed Ukraine's desire to join the Euro-Atlantic structures. Within days of the outbreak of the conflict, the leaders of Poland, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were in Tbilisi to show their solidarity and call for a quick expansion of NATO. Meanwhile, President Sarkozy, on behalf of the EU, brought a ceasefire plan to Moscow on 12 August. At about the same time, American planes airlifted Georgian soldiers back from their deployments in Iraq, and US Navy ships began delivering humanitarian aid. The US government also suspended military cooperation and a deal worth billions of dollars on civil nuclear cooperation with Moscow. In early September the State Department announced \$1 billion in reconstruction aid to Georgia, while Vice President Dick Cheney toured the Caucasus and Ukraine assuring each leader of America's support for their aspirations to join NATO. Clearly, the Western reaction to Russia's most recent moves has been more coherent and consistent than previously, but it was also measured because a military confrontation between Russia and NATO (or a group of NATO member states) would have been catastrophic for the international community. Ultimately, the region's Euro-Atlantic ambitions have shown signs of strengthening, and many now believe that the December decision on the MAP will be a formality.

In the meantime, the missile defence project received a substantial boost, as well. The long negotiations between Poland and the US were successfully concluded just a few days after the Russian invasion. The deal was signed in Warsaw on 20 August, and stipulated that the US will station a battery of Patriot missiles in Poland to strengthen Polish air defences in the face of repeated Russian threats of a missile attack. In a related development, Ukraine declared that it was ready to make its missile early warning system available to other European states. A few days later in Brussels, Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski warned that "the holidays from history have ended."² Thus, the Russian

¹ Harding, Luke. "Russia: Any Country Could Be Next, Warns Ukrainian President," *The Guardian*, 28 August, 2008.

² Mardell, Mark. "On the Cusp" *Mark Mardell's Euroblog*, BBC News website, 1 September 2008. Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markmardell/2008/09/on_the_cusp.html.

invasion of Georgia managed to do what neither the Polish government nor its US ally had been able to, namely convince a majority of the Polish people that stationing the missiles in Central Europe is a good idea. The war seems to have intensified their historically motivated fear and distrust of Russia, as public opinion in favour of the plan rose to 58%, up from 30% in March 2008. It may very well translate into an easier approval of the deal in the parliament.

There is only one area where Russia may have scored a rhetorical victory. The conflict has fired up some Congress Republicans to demand a swifter passage of the legislation releasing new funding for the missile defence program. It might seem, therefore, that Moscow tricked Washington into inadvertently admitting that the project is directed against Russia. However, this does not seem to be taken seriously, especially because by any technical assessment the missile defence system is incapable of engaging Russia's nuclear arsenal, and as such it constitutes a meagre benefit of the Georgian campaign.

Finally, the sense of Russia's strategic miscalculation was compounded by the scant backing that its actions in Georgia received among its traditional allies. The members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement (SCO) refrained from following Russia in its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Partial support for the military intervention came from Venezuela, Syria, and Iran, but Nicaragua was the only other country to recognize the two republics as of 7 September. Even China balked in the face of its own separatist threats in Tibet and the Xinjiang province, and issued a surprising call for "dialogue and consultation" between the two sides³. This, perhaps more than anything else, has demonstrated the extent of Russia's isolation. Russia is clearly back on the global stage, but not as a respected actor that it has longed to be. Rather, many of its international partners perceive Moscow's influence is increasingly malignant, and its foreign policy as unpredictable and destabilizing.

Therefore, Russia's leaders appear to have achieved a result exactly opposite to what they had intended. The war in Georgia has confirmed some of the worst fears in the West about the nature of the regime that has solidified in Moscow. Meanwhile, pressing economic and social problems inside the country continue unaddressed. The hostilities in Georgia (as well as a series of recent attacks on foreign and foreign-linked companies inside Russia) have reinforced the perception of the country as an unstable place to do business and prompted a capital flight. Since early August, the Russian Stock Exchange (RTS) has plunged by more than 30%. The country's leadership appears to believe that the wealth created by high oil prices has somehow qualified Russia to reclaim its superpower status. But energy prices are falling, and the EU is preparing to create a more coherent energy policy which would take into account the need

³ "China Calls for International Efforts to Resolve Russia-Georgia Conflict," *Xinhua News Agency*, 4 September 2008.

to diversify energy supplies and increase the share of renewable sources in its consumption. If both trends continue, Russia's petrol-dollar-fuelled economy will collapse due to a lack of sustainable foundations.

This gives the West a unique opportunity to employ economic pressure, an instrument that is often more powerful than arms. The Russian leadership's domestic and international policies have created perfect conditions where it could be used, and the West should take advantage of it.

In the Georgian conflict there were no winners. But Russia certainly stands out as the bigger loser. That is because its military victory over the much smaller Georgian army has been more than outweighed by the unprecedented EU foreign policy unity that the conflict created, something the EU had a difficult time achieving before the crisis. For Russia, it should serve as a important clue when it ponders a future confrontation with the West.

Personal Experiences from the Years of 'Late Normalization,' 1980s: Study at SS Cyril and Method's Theological Faculty in Litomerice

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Nearly 20 years after the Velvet Revolution, and the Czech Republic (among other neighbouring post-communist countries in Central Europe) has begun to expose its recent history for public consumption. Archival documents and memories of the contemporaries have often caused upheaval widely covered by the press in these countries. One of the most current topics concerns the collaboration of religious denominations with the Communist regime.

In 1948, after the Communists - atheist by nature - seized power, the new rulers pretended that they wanted to defend constitutional civil rights and that they respected the freedom of the religious denominations in Czechoslovakia. In fact, from the very beginning of the new regime the communists deliberately placed all Churches under the strict control of the state. This was especially true of the Catholics who were closely watched and persecuted.

⁴ This commentary is based on a reflection of the work entitled: *Memoáry: Jan Jandourek: Studium na bohoslovecké fakultě v Litoměřicích, osobní zkušenosti z let pozdní "normalizace"*, Soudobé dějiny XIV/2-3, Praha 2007, str. 439-448.