

## THE EVER-CHANGING DYNAMIC OF CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

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### ABSTRACT

**I**n this article, I will trace the dynamics and changes in internal conflicts in Georgia (Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts), and investigate the role of external factors and their interplay with internal factors affecting the dynamic of the conflicts. Mainstream academic litera-

ture views the two conflicts as internal. However, after the war in August 2008 that saw visible intervention from Russia, the conflicts, I argue, have turned into intra-state conflict between Georgia and Russia. My further argument is about the decisive role of external factors in the conflicts. The Western

and Georgian media tend to emphasize the role of Russia in the conflicts; academic literature is divided over the issue of the influence of external factors. I acknowledge that sometimes Russia's role is exaggerated and that less attention is paid, particularly in Geor-

gia, to Tbilisi's wrongdoings. However, overall, the presence and influence of external factors, on at least two occasions, modified the dynamic of the conflicts. Here, along with Russia, other outside players, such as the United States, contributed to the conflicts.

**KEYWORDS:** Georgian-Ossetian conflict, Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, ethnonationalism, Javakhetia, Abkhazians, Ossetians, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh.

## The Roots of the Conflicts

The roots of the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts are complex. Scholars point to a set of factors which ignited the two conflicts—the conflicts which resemble others in the post-Soviet space: the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria in Moldova. One of the main culprits is ethnonationalism, which was on the rise after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Modern theories of nationalism in turn highlight various environmental variables: modernity (Ernst Gellner<sup>1</sup>), ethnosymbolism (Anthony Smith<sup>2</sup>), political symbolism (Stuart Kaufman<sup>3</sup>), and “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson<sup>4</sup>). The collapse of the Soviet Union opened up the way for the expression of nationalism which was coupled with political turmoil and, later, economic hardship. Although a usual suspect, economic difficulties cannot explain the conflicts in the post-Soviet arena. A number of scholars rightfully pointed out that people in the Soviet republics enjoyed relatively good social, safety, and economic development until the collapse of the U.S.S.R.<sup>5</sup>

Among many factors, ethnonationalism seems to have been the main driving force behind conflicts in the post-Soviet states. However, this factor alone cannot explain why some conflicts and grievances have turned into violent wars. Nationalism was expressed by almost all ethnic groups in the former U.S.S.R. Zürcher, Cornell,<sup>6</sup> and other scholars argue that ethnonationalism found its path to violence through ethnofederalism. In those areas of the former Soviet Union where ethnic communities or groups enjoyed an autonomous administrative status, they launched separatist projects. Georgia, for example, avoided conflicts with the Armenian minority in Javakhetia, and the Azerbaijani minority in Marneuli where there was no autonomy, despite the fact that the number of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia was no less than that of Abkhazians or Ossetians.

<sup>1</sup> See: E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> See: A.D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> See: S. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See: B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised and extended edition), Verso, London, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> See: Ch. Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, New York University Press, New York, 2007; A. Yamskov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno Karabakh,” *Theory and Society*, No. 20, 1991, and others.

<sup>6</sup> See: Ch. Zürcher, op. cit.; S. Cornell, “Autonomy as a Source of Conflict: Caucasian Conflicts in Theoretical Perspective,” *World Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 2002.

However, in Moldova, Russian-populated Transnistria was successful in its separatist aspirations even though it had not enjoyed any autonomy under the Soviets. Therefore, ethnofederalism alone, although a powerful factor, cannot serve as a self-sufficient argument about the cause of conflicts in Georgia and the post-Soviet states in general. We have to add another variable to our equation—external support. Transnistria received all kinds of backing from Russia—political, military, and financial. As I argue below, the success of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was due to foreign support.

Some of the separatist movements in the post-Soviet states were, as a matter of fact, irredentist projects—Nagorno-Karabakh (backed by Armenia), South Ossetia (backed by the North Ossetia Autonomous Republic in Russia and, indirectly, by Russia itself), and Transnistria (backed directly by Russia). An external influence, among the important factors which helped to propel the conflict, brought significant manpower and financial resources. This made military actions sustainable by the separatists whose numbers were considerably less than those of central governments.<sup>7</sup> The most striking common denominator of all the violent conflicts in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova is that small separatist groups were able to achieve victories over central governments. This mere fact is sufficient to encourage reflection about the players who stood behind such successes.

The answer to this conundrum lies in the investigation of external factors and the players in the conflicts. The separatist movements were used by regional powers and the countries concerned, particularly so-called “kin-states,” to advance their political agenda. The importance of the external support of the separatists is acknowledged and investigated in the work of several experts.<sup>8</sup> Ostap Odushkin opines: “Support (both political and financial) for separatists usually comes either from a kin-state of the national minority (Crimea), or diaspora (Northern Ireland) or from countries which are rivals of the state from which separatists want to secede. It is rarely backed and financed exclusively by locals (either businesses or ordinary people).”<sup>9</sup>

Odushkin believes that separatism became a factor that could be traded off by some governments to get better treatment for those states’ diaspora, or to expand their geopolitical influence. The latter was important in driving Russian interest toward Georgia. Initially, during the Soviet period, Moscow wanted to quell the national-liberation movement through a web of internal clashes within Georgia, and later, after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Russia was interested in keeping Georgian foreign policy objectives under control.

While highlighting the external factors inspiring separatism in Ossetia and Abkhazia, I am not inclined to diminish internal factors. Many scholars argue, rightfully, that Georgian nationalism, especially President Gamsakhurdia’s rhetoric such as “Georgia is for Georgians,” fuelled ethnic grievances among minority groups. What I am trying to manifest here is that, without external support (and I mean substantial support), the events in Georgia might have gone a different way. Power-sharing agreements which were discussed and negotiated, especially with the Abkhazian separatists, could have been implemented, and bloodshed avoided. Due to an external influence, both Georgian nation-

<sup>7</sup> There were less than 120,000 Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh against seven million Azerbaijanis; 67,000 Ossetians, and 100,000 Abkhaz vs. five million Georgians.

<sup>8</sup> See: B. Wardhani, *External Support for Liberation Movements in Aceh and Papua*, Paper presented at the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Canberra, 29 June-2 July, 2004, available at [<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/SpecialProj/ASAA/biennial-conference/2004/Wardhani-B-ASAA2004.pdf>]; R. Griffiths, *Globalization, Development and Separatism: The Influence of External and Internal Economic Factors on the Strategy of Separatism*, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the ISA’s 49th Annual Convention, Bridging Multiple Divides, Hilton San Francisco, San Francisco, 26 March, 2008, available at [[http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p252789\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p252789_index.html)]; St. Saideman, “Discrimination in International Relations: Analyzing External Support for Ethnic Groups,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2002, pp. 27-50.

<sup>9</sup> O. Odushkin, “Problem of Separatism in the Post-Communist Space: Internal and External Sources. ‘The Case of Ukraine’,” *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, No. 2, 2003, pp. 30-54.

alism, and Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatism, hardened and became intransigent. For the separatists, Russian support was instrumental in building local resistance, and their position on the negotiation table lost flexibility as more time passed. For Georgian hardcore nationalists, the perception that Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatism was merely a game for the Russian empire, created the impression, incorrectly, that there was an absence of real grievances on the side of the minorities.

Another factor was the phenomenon of a weak or failed state, as successfully argued by Jack Goldstone,<sup>10</sup> which created a breeding ground for the loss of legitimacy by the government, but not necessarily for the final outcome—insurgency and violence. However, conflicts in Georgia started when the Soviet administration was in power—Georgia was by no means a weak state. In this domain, we have to consider the important context of *perestroika*—the final years of the Soviet Union were characterized by attempts at reformation. The ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet states emerged against the background of national-liberation movements (only perhaps in the case of Azerbaijan, the national-liberation movement started after, and on the wave of, a secessionist demand from the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh). Moscow viewed the potential of Georgia's secession from the Soviet Union cautiously, and the internal clashes with minority groups played out well for the Soviet authorities.

Last but not least, historical factors had negative effects on the post-Soviet conflicts. However, in the case of Georgia, their influence was less visible. While history played an important role in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, minority groups in Georgia had no previous experience of what can only be called massive bloodshed, something which might have left a strong imprint on ethnic memories. Georgians and, particularly, Ossetians enjoyed a peaceful co-existence, and even symbiosis. Much of their troubled relations were with Abkhazia, and this history was related to their conquest by the Russian Empire and the exodus of the Muslim population from Georgia. The Abkhazians complained that, during the Stalin era, Abkhazia suffered from "Georgianization." Georgians argued nevertheless that the Abkhazian autonomous status became stronger under the Soviets. Still, those grievances were not enough, or, at least, were less painful and of insufficient importance, to fuel a civil war.

## Civil Wars in Georgia (1989-1993)

The civil wars in Georgia went through three stages: the first was between 1989-1993, a period of war and military clashes which can in turn be subdivided into two—Soviet (1989-1991), and post-Soviet (1991-1993). The conflicts between Tbilisi and the separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia can be regarded as classical civil wars though, as I would argue, these wars were marked tremendously by Russian interference. The second stage (1993-2003), dubbed as "frozen," lasted until the Rose Revolution in Georgia, and was marked by the absence of both progress at the negotiation table, and significant clashes along the ceasefire line. The outbreak of war in August 2008 was neither accidental nor sudden. Therefore I argue that the third stage (2003-2008) began after 2003 with the ascent of Mikhail Saakashvili to power, an occasion which was characterized by evolving tension, and ended with Russian intervention. The current, fourth, stage is not a more classical civil war or internal conflict, rather it has become an intra-state conflict between Georgia and Russia. In subsequent sections, I will follow the trail of external influence and factors in the Georgian conflicts.

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<sup>10</sup> See: J. Goldstone, "Pathways to State Failure," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2008, pp. 285-296.

The first turmoil in Georgia began in April 1989 in the autonomous region of Abkhazia with a claim to independence, which was followed by the same from South Ossetia. Georgian nationalists responded with demonstrations in Tbilisi, which eventually turned into an anti-Communist protest, and was brutally crushed by Soviet troops who killed about 20 people. On the wave of anti-communist sentiments, former Soviet dissident, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, won the first democratic election in Georgia. His tenure was marred by authoritarianism, and the rise of chauvinism.

The conflict in South Ossetia became violent after the Ossetian local authorities passed a bill aimed at transforming the Ossetian Autonomous Oblast into an Autonomous Republic in August 1990, and then an independent entity within the U.S.S.R. The war of bills and laws was particularly sharp between Georgia and Abkhazia as well.

At this critical juncture of legal battles, Moscow, in order to pressure the rebellious Georgians under Gamsakhurdia, backed the separatist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The South Ossetians received a great deal of support from their compatriots in the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic in Russia.

Gamsakhurdia, miscalculating its military potential, sent troops into South Ossetia to tame the separatists, but failed. He was unwilling to accept any compromise, and forced the Georgian parliament to abolish South Ossetia's autonomous status. This, along with the many other failures of the Gamsakhurdian regime, inspired the coup d'état in Tbilisi. The new president of Georgia became Eduard Shevardnadze, a former leader of Soviet Georgia, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the U.S.S.R., and one of the major proponents of perestroika.

The collapse of the U.S.S.R. in December 1991 led to a tense fight in January 1992 between Georgians and Ossetians. Russia was on the brink of war with Georgia in order to defend South Ossetia, and Ruslan Khasbulatov, chairman of the Russian parliament, warned that, if Georgia did not stop the bloodshed, Russia would consider granting South Ossetia a status within Russia. At the same time, the Russian vice-president, Vladimir Rutskoi, telephoned Shevardnadze and threatened to bomb Tbilisi.

On 22 June, 1992, Russian President Yeltsin and Shevardnadze met in Dagomys, Russia, and, along with North and South Ossetian representatives, signed the Sochi Agreement which called for a ceasefire and the deployment of joint Russian, Georgian and Ossetian peacekeeping forces. Shevardnadze admitted that the conflict in South Ossetia was the mistake of Gamsakhurdia, and pledged to work on a resolution to the conflict.

While Shevardnadze accused Gamsakhurdia of wrongdoings, his own policy toward Abkhazia also failed (Gamsakhurdia was much more successful in negotiating with the Abkhaz leadership). However, it was not solely Shevardnadze's fault. The renewal of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict was inspired by both sides: the Abkhazian leadership of Ardzinba, and Georgian nationalist paramilitary groups under Kitovani (although Kitovani reacted to the declaration of independence by Abkhazia in June 1992). During 1992-1993, the most violent period of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, Russia supplied the Abkhazian side with weapons and mercenaries, particularly during the takeover of Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia.<sup>11</sup> North Caucasian volunteers en masse, including Shamil Basaev,<sup>12</sup> were fighting against Georgia. Eventually, Georgia, after a long negotiation under the auspices of the United Nations, and with Russian mediation, had to sign a memorandum of ceasefire in December 1993 in Geneva, Switzerland.

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<sup>11</sup> The Russian involvement, particularly in the air strike campaign to take Sukhumi from Georgians is well documented by a number of sources (see: Th. Goltz, *Georgia Diary: A Chronicle of War and Political Chaos in the Post-Soviet Caucasus*, Routledge, New York, 2006; T. Cooper, "Georgia and Abkhazia, 1992-1993: The War of Datchas, 29 September, 2003, available at [[http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/article\\_282.shtml](http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/article_282.shtml)]).

<sup>12</sup> Shamil Basaev later became the prominent warlord of the Chechen separatists.

What can we extract from this brief overview of the civil wars? Firstly, it is the direct presence of Russia at all negotiations, mostly fulfilling the duties of a gendarmerie rather than a neutral broker. Secondly, Russian officials openly sided with the separatists, and even threatened Georgia. Interestingly enough, tension in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was never simultaneous—it seemed as if both conflicts “waited in a queue” to spark once one conflict had calmed down. When Abkhazia’s first turmoil passed (1989-1990), South Ossetia was on the rise (1990-1992), just to be followed by another round of bloodshed in Abkhazia (1992-1993).

However, during this period (1989-1993), much of the bloodshed could have been avoided if the Georgian leadership had not been so nationalist, and “it is equally wrong to attribute all of Georgia’s misfortune to a malicious, well-planned imperial policy.”<sup>13</sup> At the juncture of the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the first year of the breakup (August 1991-end of 1992), Moscow lost control not only over the former Soviet republics, but even its own territories. During this period, in neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan, a war was on the rise as well. Initially, after the Soviet breakup, the Armenians were successful in the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijanis (August 1991-June 1992). After that, the new Azerbaijani leadership launched an offensive and took many territories back (July-September 1992).

Nevertheless, by the beginning of 1993, Moscow managed to install some internal stability in a new house called the Russian Federation, and later showed muscle in the South Caucasus. 1993 was marked by the great defeat of Georgia and Azerbaijan at the hands of Abkhazia and Armenia, respectively. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan at that time were defiant, they did not support the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (an organization created by Moscow to unite all post-Soviet republics), and joined it only in the fall of 1993.

## A Frozen Stage (1993-2003)

In the 1990s, the conflicts in Georgia (and between Armenia and Azerbaijan) were dubbed “frozen.” By 1994, all conflicts in the South Caucasus ended with a ceasefire and various interim agreements. A volume of research was conducted by scholars to analyze the frozen status, and offer the best option for a resolution. Academics and scholars viewed them as potentially flammable and, as was put by Svante Cornell with a far-sighted prediction, “virtually all conflicts are frozen along ceasefire lines ... in fact not a peace but perhaps a mere interruption in the conflict area.”<sup>14</sup>

There were several factors that stopped the conflict:

- *Exhaustion of the parties involved, ripeness of the conflict.* De-escalation was preceded by escalation to the highest point, and the impetus for change came from the toll taken on all sides from the losses suffered in combat<sup>15</sup>;
- *A clash of regional and global powers, particularly Russian pressure* that caused either inaction or interference in the conflict, and, in turn, balanced the power of the parties to the conflicts.

The consequence was that the conflicts were not solved, but lived on in a passive form without violence. Hence, unrecognized mini-“states” were allowed to consolidate their control over the ter-

<sup>13</sup> Ch. Zürcher, op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> S. Cornell, “Peace or War? The Prospect for Conflicts in the Caucasus,” *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. IX, No. 2, Summer 1997, p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> See: M. Mooradian, D. Druckman, “Hurting Stalemate or Mediation? The Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, 1990-1995,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 36, No. 6, 1999, pp. 709-727.

territories they had conquered militarily. Even if no independent state granted recognition to either Abkhazia or South Ossetia during that period, power in these territories continued to be exercised by the political organs of the separatists, and was backed from the outside, namely Russia. The latter, besides providing military and economic support, embarked upon an important legal exercise, offering Russian citizenship to the population of the breakaway regions.

Both the Georgian leadership, under Shevardnadze, and the separatists had many incentives to seek a resolution to the conflicts, though on terms favorable to the respective parties. The severe economic situation in Georgia, including territories under the control of the separatists, was a factor which kept the adversary parties formally at the table, and gave them impetus, at least, to search for ways of enforcing stability which, in turn, was aimed at easing the economic hardship. Lack of recognition by the international community was another factor which forced the separatists to seek a solution to the conflicts.

At the same time, the status quo was also somewhat comfortable to Shevardnadze, helping him to keep a grip on power. Definitely, it was in the interests of Russia, too, to maintain leverage over a shattered Georgia by keeping the conflicts frozen and unresolved.

Re-escalation of the conflict and the opening of armed hostilities were not in Shevardnadze's plan as he was preoccupied by his personal power (and it also served the interests of the Georgian state, as events in August 2008 proved). The failure of military actions against the separatists might have led to internal political instability and/or the possibility of the opposition's success. Furthermore, Shevardnadze realized that he could not fight against the Russians who would immediately intervene in the case of re-escalation.

Some factors, present at that time, were conducive to defrosting the conflicts. Arms supply was among the factors influencing the balance of power in the region. Much emphasis was placed on a Georgian purchase, while Russia was also arming the local separatists, in addition to its direct presence in the regions, under the guise of peacekeeper.

However, I believe the most acute factor for the re-escalation of conflict was revanchism, particularly among refugees and internally displaced persons. Since the central governments (Gamsakhurdia, in the case of South Ossetia, and Shevardnadze, in the case of Abkhazia) had suffered humiliating defeats against the separatists who were significantly weaker in number, intolerance for the status of the lost wars was growing increasingly.

The frozen period was also characterized by a lack of international attention to the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Initially, the Balkan wars were blamed for diverting attention from the bloodshed in the region—which was no less intense and brutal than that in the Balkans. Later, the international community stepped up its efforts to resolve the conflict, but still lacked either vigor or considerable interest. It must be noted that the region, situated between Europe and Asia, is an important strategic location, has neighbors such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey, and possesses rich mineral resources, particularly oil and gas (in Azerbaijan). However, despite this, the South Caucasus remained less important for major players, for example, the United States and the European Union, whose attention was primarily focused on the Balkans or the Middle East. At the same time, Russia was increasing its grip on the region, and declared the zone part of its inalienable interests.<sup>16</sup>

Despite overall passiveness, we cannot deny the fact that there were attempts to find solutions to the conflicts. In 1993, the United Nations Secretary-General proposed a comprehensive peace plan that included negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations, and international control by peacekeepers. Only Georgia agreed with the U.N. peace plan, while Russia and the Abkhazian side expressed reservations about the peacekeeping operation—they wanted the exclusive presence of Russian peacekeepers, which was finally agreed to by Georgia in 1994.

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<sup>16</sup> See: K. Fedarko *et al.*, "In Russia's Shadow," *Time*, 11 October, 1993.

In 2000, several proposals on the establishment of a security system in the Caucasus were made. These systems included regional countries, as well as regional and global powers such as Russia, the U.S., and EU. Turkey's President Süleyman Demirel proposed the idea of a Stability Pact for the Caucasus on 16 January, 2000 at a speech in Tbilisi during a meeting with President Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze himself had also made a number of speeches in favor of regional peace initiatives.

The EU encouraged regional cooperation with and among all three South Caucasus countries, and mounted significant regional projects such as the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) network. However, as Michael Emerson mentioned, "the first needs are to set out the essence of the alternative mechanisms that are conceivable, and clarify what might be the name of the game in strategic and geopolitical terms."<sup>17</sup> The geopolitical rivalry between, first of all, Russia and the United States, made it impossible to clarify such essence. While Azerbaijan and Georgia tended to favor cooperation with the West, Armenia and the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were naturally opposed to such a move. Their separatist projects thus were dependent on Russia. Bruno Coppieters noted in this regard that "if the existing balance of power in the Caucasus remains, it will create a deadlock for all parties involved."<sup>18</sup>

While relations between Tbilisi and the separatist regions were frozen, domestic policy in the country was characterized by tension which resulted in two attempts on Shevardnadze's life and occasional mutinies. Shevardnadze's popularity was diminishing, and this led to the Rose Revolution in 2003, and the relevant change in the dynamic of the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

## From Roses to Thorns (2003-2008)

The change in Georgia's leadership after the Rose Revolution had tremendous implications for both domestic and international policy. Much is written about the nature and real benefit of those changes—some praised Saakashvili, some doubted the real success, but one thing is obvious: Georgia became more assertive in its internal and foreign policy objectives. One of the first successes of Saakashvili's government was Ajaria, which had been ruled by the local omnipotent lord, Aslan Abashidze, for some time. The peaceful change of Ajaria's leadership is explained by the non-confrontational nature of differences between Georgians and Ajars (Georgian Muslims). By the spring of 2004, Abashidze was gone, and this success inspired Saakashvili to start working on a resolution to the South Ossetian conflict. In the meantime, Saakashvili openly declared a pro-western, pro-NATO, and pro-EU policy which was at odds with Russian interests.

In the media and academic literature, there is an opinion that Saakashvili provoked Russian interference, and miscalculated Russia's (un)willingness to openly encroach on Georgian territory. Opponents of such an approach argue that Russia provoked the Georgian attack on South Ossetia, and it would have found any pretext to interfere in Georgia anyway. Cornell, Starr et al. show that the Kremlin was provoking the Georgian side for many months before the August 2008 war.<sup>19</sup>

But before going into detail about the August 2008 war, we should understand the context of the geopolitical shift which occurred in the first decade of the 21st century in the Caucasus, and the post-Soviet states at large.

<sup>17</sup> M. Emerson, *Approaches to the Stabilization of the Caucasus. Brainstorming Session: The Future of the Caucasus after the Second Chechnya Conflict*, Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels, 27-28 January, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> B. Coppieters, "A Regional Security System for the Caucasus," *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 & 2, available at [<http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/crs/eng/Vol5/coppieters.htm>].

<sup>19</sup> See: S. Cornell, F. Starr, *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, N.Y., 2009.



The first factor influencing change was a wave of so-called “color revolutions” (Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005)), which brought internal transformation and threatened Russian domination. The second factor was Russia’s growth—under President Vladimir Putin, the country was able to regain internal control and stability, and thanks to petrodollars, to boost its economy and military potential. Exactly, in this period, Russia was threatened by the color revolutions, and decided to act more aggressively. The third factor was a growing disagreement between Russia and the West over many issues, including the U.S. anti-missile program and the status of Kosovo. Granting Kosovo an independent status in February 2008 ran contrary to the Russian position, and Putin was contemplating retaliation—the Georgian August crisis was an opportunity that he could not miss. The fourth factor (actually a post-factor) was the U.S.-Russian “reset” declared by the Obama administration, which made relations with Russia much more significant for the American administration and its Western allies, than relations with other former communist states. By August 2008, the outgoing Bush administration was backtracking and reluctant to engage in meaningful action with regard to the crisis.

Against this background, Georgia launched an offensive in South Ossetia, though it claimed that it sent troops to the region after the Russians had already crossed the Georgian-Russian border. There are still competing versions of the events of August 2008. What is clear is that Saakashvili had some success in reaching out to the South Ossetians, and this made the Russians nervous—one of the South Ossetian settlements, Kurta, had a round of successful negotiations with Tbilisi. (Even now, Moscow has difficulty controlling South Ossetia. In February 2012, under Moscow’s pressure, the election results of a regional leader were abolished because of the victory of an opposition candidate.) Therefore, for the Kremlin, it was highly desirable to break, once and for all, any possibility of reconciliation between Tbilisi and the breakaway regions. For the time being, before August 2008, Russia accelerated the process of granting citizenship to South Ossetians and Abkhazians, and enhanced economic support.<sup>20</sup> The Kremlin frequently invited the leaders of the separatist regions—Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria (Moldova) to the consultations.

Regardless, while Russia’s true intention was contemplated long before August 2008, we should also note the mistakes on the Georgian side. Was Saakashvili trapped in a Russian game? My answer is yes, and this was his mistake. Saakashvili miscalculated the Russian reaction—he hoped that once the Georgian forces were deployed and fully controlled the region (and he said as much to the French President Nicolas Sarkozy), Moscow would not act openly against Tbilisi. But, for Vladimir Putin, it was a moment to retaliate against a personally disliked Georgian leader and the West (for Kosovo), and to put an end to any Georgian aspiration for NATO membership. The media reported that, during a telephone conversation after the resolution of the crisis in Ajaria in 2004, in response to Saakashvili’s gratitude for Russia’s contribution to the peaceful resolution of the crisis, Vladimir Putin said: “Now remember, we did not intervene in Ajaria, but you won’t have any gifts from us in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.”<sup>21</sup>

Thomas de Waal opines that Saakashvili’s youthful behavior, lack of elderly and experienced advisors, and the presence of young hawkish ministers paved the way to the August 2008 crisis. “In 2008, Georgia went to war with Russia with a forty-year-old president, thirty-six-year-old prime-minister, a thirty-one-year-old foreign minister, and twenty-nine-year-old defense minister.”<sup>22</sup> Further, there is the impression that Saakashvili was much too reliant on his Western allies, and the United States in particular. The latter carries its portion of responsibility for non-clarification of its

<sup>20</sup> See: A. Illarionov, “The Russian Leadership’s Preparation for War, 1999-2008,” in: S. Cornell, F. Starr, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> “Saakashvili’s Account of Events that Led to Conflict,” *Civil Georgia*, 25 August, 2008, available at [<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19282>].

<sup>22</sup> Th. de Waal, *The Caucasus: An introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, p. 196.

potential, and its willingness to act in the Russian “near abroad”, although it is reported that U.S. officials, including President Bush, advised Saakashvili to resolve the conflicts peacefully.

### *Conclusion*

The result of the August 2008 war, I believe, revealed the main player behind the separatism in Georgia. Russia’s genuine desire with regard to the Georgian separatist regions was clearly manifested, not only by the operation in South Ossetia, but also by the military advancement in Abkhazia. If Russia’s goal was to enforce peace in South Ossetia, as it declared, why had it helped and encouraged the Abkhazian offense against Tbilisi? The real goal was to cut off both the republics from any possible return to Tbilisi’s control. After the war, Russia solidified the result of the military occupation. On 26 August, 2008, Moscow officially recognized both regions as independent, and moreover, launched an international campaign to achieve recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence by the international community, which thus far has resulted in acceptance by Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Vanuatu.

At every stage of the conflicts within Georgia, authorities in Moscow played a crucial role in instigating and maintaining them. While blaming Moscow, I do not limit my criticism of Georgian leadership and nationalism. Nor do I intend to ignore the Western bloc—the U.S., NATO, and EU—either for inaction, or for sending the wrong message to the authorities in Tbilisi.

However, this article argues that, without external factors, the conflicts in Georgia would have played out differently, not necessarily more peacefully, although that would most probably have been the case. Definitely, the sides to the conflicts might have had a more flexible approach in seeking resolution to their disagreements.