

The many dimensions of ethnic conflict: South Ossetia, Georgia, Russia, and the 'precedent' of Kosovo

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STEFAN WOLFF, SEP 1 2008

The recent events in the South Caucasus once again highlight the pervasive and destructive forces inherent in ethnic nationalism. Deluded by its own military capabilities and the support it would receive from western powers, Georgia launched a futile attack on separatist forces in South Ossetia. Delighted with having found a pretext to demonstrate its military might and restored great-power ambition, Russia seized the opportunity to crush whatever military power Georgia might have had accumulated during the years of a US-sponsored train-and-equip programme and establish unambiguously its claim to regional hegemony. In less than a fortnight after Georgia's attempt to restore its full sovereignty over South Ossetia—legally a part of Georgia, but according to a conflict settlement dating back to the early 1990s under CIS peacekeeping protection—Georgia had not only lost South Ossetia but also Abkhazia, a second separatist province now recognised by Russia, alongside South Ossetia, as an independent state and under Russian protection. In the course of this short conflict, more than 100 people, mostly civilians were killed, and thousands displaced. Moreover, whatever little chance there may have been for a resolution of Georgia's conflicts within its borders was vanquished with the atrocities committed by both sides in a few days of fighting. The Russian reaction (which was disproportionate in scope, but at least initially not completely unjustified in the face of a Georgian assault on the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, in clear breach of the 1992 ceasefire agreement) confirmed Georgian leaders and their allies in the US and parts of Europe in their view that Russia was nothing but the evil Soviet empire under a new name. Thus, Georgia cut off diplomatic relations with Russia, there is talk in the West about isolating Russia, and in Russia about it all being a plot by the Bush administration to help the Republican candidate for the White House, John McCain, win the US presidential elections in November.

How can all of this be related to, let alone caused by, what many had considered one of a few 'frozen conflicts' that constituted some unfinished, but not exactly worrisome business from the dying days of the Soviet Union? Apart from the fact that the notion of 'frozen conflict' quite obviously was a misconception, the answer lies in the multi-dimensionality of ethnic conflicts, such as the one in and over South Ossetia, that should not be misunderstood as simply local phenomena but that have wider ramifications and are shaped by factors well beyond their locale. Having said that, it is nevertheless useful to begin any attempt to understand what has been going on by looking at the conflict on the ground. The break-up of the Soviet Union from the late 1980s onwards led to rising nationalism in many of the Union Republics, including Georgia. This was, first and foremost, an anti-Russian impulse, but it also had clear implications for any non-Georgian group, such as Ossetians and Abkhaz who feared, rightly, Georgian linguistic, cultural, and political dominance and rather wished to remain part of the Russian federation. As tensions escalated, violence broke out, causing hundreds, if not thousands, to die and created around a quarter of a million displaced people in Georgia—Georgians who fled from South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Abkhaz and Ossetians who fled from Georgia proper. Internationally mediated ceasefire agreements charged the nascent CIS with peace keeping, thus giving Russia a formal role and reason to deploy troops in both regions. Georgia, under the presidency of ex-Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, was unenthusiastic to take on Russia over either territory. Russia, throughout the 1990s, was a weak state, humiliated by NATO expansion, in huge foreign debt, and with a sluggish economy. With apparently no clear and present danger emanating from either conflict, the international community did not prioritise their resolution either.

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Fast forward to 2004. Mikhail Saakashvili becomes President of Georgia in the wake of the Rose Revolution and on a platform to reunite the country. Hailed in the West as a democrat, reformer and moderniser, he receives massive political, and some economic backing – notably the inclusion of Georgia in the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy and eventually, in April 2008, a promise of future membership in NATO. At the same time, Russia has overcome its political and economic crises—Putin-style 'sovereign' democracy and a surge in oil and gas prices on the world market drive Russian ambitions to be recognised as a great power again. Relations between Georgia and Russia had already deteriorated significantly since 2004, not least because of Saakashvili's pro-western course and declared intention to join NATO, and possibly the EU. Meanwhile, South Ossetia and Abkhazia remain low on the international priority list. Organised crime and politics become ever closer connected, and there is also some evidence that areas close to Abkhazia were used as training and transit camps for foreign fighters in Chechnya. Russia, too, sees little reason to rush a resolution of these conflicts: instability in Georgia surely remains an obstacle to the country's aspirations for NATO and EU membership.

Four years on, and the situation has changed once again. By 2008, Kosovo has unilaterally declared its independence, and has been recognised by the US and a significant number of EU member states against the express concerns of Russia. While it would be overstating the case to say that this caused separatism in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it clearly indicates that international borders are not sacrosanct, regardless of whatever the legitimate reasons might be for recognising independent Kosovo's statehood. Moreover, NATO's invitation to Georgia, however unspecified in terms of a date it might have been, indicates a change in thinking, at least on the part of the US, that Georgian membership might be desirable enough to interpret political stability a bit more flexibly. Put this in the context of US plans of establishing a missile defence shield in Europe, and it is not too difficult to see that Russia might easily perceive a more aggressive and hostile NATO encroaching on its own backyard.

Georgia thus becomes more and more a case where both sides think they need to make a stand and draw a line in the sand. Russia needs to establish firmly that it considers the former Soviet Union (with the exception of the Baltic States) a zone of vital security interests in which it is prepared to enforce its own hegemonic interests, if necessary through military force. For the West, supporting Georgia, politically and economically, and threatening Russia with sanctions and repercussions becomes equally important; however misguided support for Saakashvili and his reckless brinkmanship may be, the West cannot allow Russia to dictate its will to sovereign countries no matter how central they are to Russia's self-perceived strategic interests.

And this brings us right back to ethnic conflicts, frozen or not. What happened in Georgia in August 2008, is of immediate significance for Ukraine and Moldova. Not only are these two countries in the neighbourhood of both the EU and Russia and have expressed interests for closer cooperation (in the case of Ukraine, even NATO membership), they have their own past and present conflicts: Crimea in Ukraine, Transnistria, and to a lesser extent Gagauzia, in Moldova. Reigning in Georgia by exploiting an escalating ethnic conflict thus sends a clear, and threatening, message to Ukraine and Moldova as well, potentially emboldening local leaders in the conflict zones there to up their demands and count on Russian support. This is a dangerous game that can easily backfire, as an escalation that it cannot control is not necessarily in Russia's interest either.

So, what is to be done? First, isolation of Russia is not a constructive way forward, nor are Russian threats to target missile defence installations in Poland with nuclear weapons. Russia and the West, beyond all their current difficulties need each other. They are economic partners: the EU is the largest market for Russian oil and gas which creates enormous mutual dependencies that neither side can afford to disrupt. But Russia and the West are also political partners: fundamentalist terrorism, organised crime, Iranian nuclear ambitions, to name but a few, are potential threats to both, and, what is more, challenges that can only be jointly mastered.

Second, conflict resolution needs to move up on the international agenda, not only in Georgia but also in relation to the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in relation to the conflict over Transnistria. While the EU has been very active through its Special Representative in Moldova and made significant progress there, the OSCE, over the past decade-and-a-half has not achieved much in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. The promising work that the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus had done in Georgia, meanwhile, has all but evaporated over the last three weeks. And this then is the point at which multi-

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dimensionality needs to be considered again. Just as these conflicts are not purely local in their causes and consequences, neither are the responses that they require. Conflict settlement will by necessity mean considering the interests of the parties involved on the ground, as well as the interests of Russia and the West. External actors from Moscow to Brussels to Washington need to talk to each other, to listen, and to take each other's concerns seriously. A common position by a truly international community would be a crucial step towards a settlement that could be fair, just, and sustainable. It would still require local cooperation, but without it local parties can play a divided international community off for their own benefit. The results of this are, more often than not, deeply disturbing and costly for the many innocent civilians that needlessly suffer as long as conflicts such as those in South Ossetia and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space are allowed to linger on.

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