

What Could Have Happened in the Caucasus

John Colarusso

Professor in the Anthropology Department of McMaster University, Ontario.

Paper read at the conference "Independence of Abkhazia and Prospects for the Caucasus" organized by the Friends of Abkhazia Civil Initiative. Istanbul, Bilgi University, 30-31 May 2009.

The Russo – Georgian Conflict of August 2008 showed many peculiar features, even by the outrageous standards of warfare. These were evident even before hostilities erupted. One must infer that Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, assumed the United States would come to Georgia's aid, or at least that its might would restrain Russia. Otherwise there is no way to explain why Georgia ignored Russian troop exercises and build up in the North Caucasus in the preceding month. Clearly too, Saakashvili did not take seriously Putin's rebuke to the West over the recognition by many Western states of Kosovo's independence, declared on February 17, 2008. Prime Minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin, warned then that Russia would seek to redress what it saw as an insult to itself and its traditional ally, Serbia. In this lapse Saakashvili seems to have been joined by those same Western states, which also showed no signs of taking Russia's objections seriously.

Georgian tactics were also highly peculiar. Georgia seems to have attacked South Ossetia's regional capital, Tskhinval(i), about midnight Aug 7-8. The initial assault seems to have been quite heavy. Curiously, however, Georgia failed to block the Roki tunnel, an easy task that could have been accomplished with one guided bomb. The Roki tunnel is old and narrow. It is also the most "convenient" route for Russian forces to enter Georgia. Blocking Roki would have kept most Russian forces out, if they entered on August 8. Blocking Roki would have trapped Russian forces if they entered on Aug. 7, prior to the Georgian onslaught, which now seems unlikely. The tunnel is just wide enough for Russian tanks. It would have been easy to have closed it and made Russian entry far more difficult. Georgia failed to heed warnings from the United States Department of State not to use force. Rather, Georgia seems to have bought into the US ethic of military prowess as well as into the US's lingering estimation that Russia was still in a condition of abject weakness. The vision that American trained Georgian troops could easily "whip" Russian conscripts was something that circulated in certain low-level contacts between Americans and Georgians. While not official, one can still easily imagine the appeal such talk must have had for Saakashvili, whose experience with ousting the local warlord, Aslan Abashidze, and bringing Adjara to heel early in his administration (May 2004) must have whetted his appetite for force.

Russian tactics were portrayed as brutal by the Western media, but in fact showed a combination of restraint and excess that was almost as peculiar as the behavior of Georgia. Russia saw Georgia as a suitable target to redress its insult over Kosovo, naturally enough. Russia went to unusual lengths to ground its actions in international law, which was part of her effort to adopt Western norms of international conduct.† Russia knew in advance of Georgia's plans, showing of course that she had penetrated the Georgian government and military in a fashion reminiscent of the Soviet era. Russia staged military exercises in the North Caucasus and left massed troops there, which sent Tbilisi a clear signal. Russia also had to use the Roki Tunnel, or attempt an airborne or an amphibious assault. The first would have been difficult because of the Caucasus massif.

The second would have been problematic because of Ukraine's control of Sevastopol. She might have tried a circuitous route through Abkhazia, which in itself would have had adverse political consequences because this region was not under attack. Nevertheless, such a route would have enabled Russian forces to cut off Georgians from the rear and sever their supply lines. In short,

Russia made no obvious attempt to secure alternatives to the Roki, which is most peculiar, suggesting a great degree of confidence. Russia then proceeded to damage Georgian military assets and a good deal of civilian infrastructure, including an ancient forest. She occupied the port of Poti, perhaps to test it as a future alternative to Sevastopol. She also sank Georgian military craft that were in port. Russia dropped bombs near the Supsa and Ceyhan pipelines in southeast Georgia, but restrained from doing any damage to either of them. Russia repaired the Abkhaz railroad prior to driving Svan troops out of the Kodor(i) Gorge. Finally, Russia recognized the statehood of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and set up border regimes while strengthening her troop levels in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. All this can be found in the Western media. More interesting, however, is what Russia did not do.

Russia did not topple Saakashvili and seize Georgia. She could have done so militarily, but at considerable cost in diplomatic damage with the West. The Kremlin made a cautious calculation as to just how much diplomatic strain she would suffer before the interests of the West would bring about some return to normal. She did not want to risk a prolonged or profound rupture. Short of annexation Russia could have challenged the legitimacy of the Saakashvili regime by setting up a puppet alternative. Russia did not set up such a puppet government outside Tbilisi, even though many in the Georgian opposition might have found such an alternative tempting. As mentioned, Russia did not destroy the pipelines, even though to have done so would have been in her long term economic interests, though of course the West would have viewed such destruction as directly hostile to its own interests. Russia did not keep a permanent presence within Georgia "proper." Rather, Russia was not recalcitrant, but acceded to French (Western) diplomatic efforts, though many matters of implementation were slow in Western eyes. Russia did not push on through Georgia to the rest of the South Caucasus, specifically, into Nagorno Karabagh and Azerbaijan. While such a mass invasion would have been difficult and disastrous for political relations with the West, in the long term it would have restored the entire Caucasus to Russian control, a theme that seems to have sentimental weight in many Russian circles.

What conclusions may we draw from such a strange war? First, this was a peripheral war where dominance was asserted, but vital interests of an outside rival were respected, so as not to trigger outside intervention or a prolonged rupture. As such it was perhaps odd, but not entirely anomalous. It was war as a message from Russia first to Georgia and second to Georgia's backers.

The aftermath was predictable. The West was shocked and angry. It failed to judge the depth of Russian anger over Kosovo and Serbia. It failed also to see the resurgence of the Russian military, even though with Chechnia this should have been obvious. The might of the West was seen to be lacking, bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan. The West suspended many links with Russia in retaliation, only to resume most of them within a year. The West provided yet more aid to Georgia. Curiously, Georgian banks, bankrupt before August 2008, by October were recapitalized, obviously with funds drawn from this aid. Most importantly, the West lost credibility as an actor on the Russian periphery. Russia looms larger there again. The Central Asian states have drawn closer to Moscow, as has Azerbaijan. The Baltic states seek renewed assurances from NATO, especially with renewed NATO air patrols.

Farther afield, Russia has flirted with Venezuela, in America's backyard, giving lie to the frequently enunciated ideal that in the 21st century nations no longer have spheres of influence. The West has dropped talk of NATO membership or Partnership for Peace for both Georgia and Ukraine. Nevertheless, the West still held NATO military games in Georgia in May, 2009, over Russian protests. Recent civil unrest directed at Saakashvili has failed to dislodge him. Most recently (July 2009) Vice President Biden visited Tbilisi and expressed renewed support for Georgia and Saakashvili.

How long the preceding effects last remains to be seen. Some long-term results, however, can be deduced with confidence. First, Georgia has irrevocably lost Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Only the total collapse of the Russian Federation would offer a chance for restoration and this would be bloody. America still endorses Georgia's territorial integrity within Stalin's borders as stipulated in 1931. This may seem like "retarded stubbornness" (B. George Hewitt, *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* (CRIA) interview, 07 May 2009). Professor Hewitt notes that America remains indifferent to facts on the ground and embraces remote diplomatic principles. There is, however, purpose in the endorsement of Georgia's territorial integrity. The West, led by America, seeks to thwart the resurgence of Russia and perhaps other nations by adhering to territorial integrity no matter what. Selfdetermination, another lofty principle, is seen as threatening widespread unrest in a range of nations. In effect, the United States has drawn a red line at the Russian – Georgian boundary for reasons that have little to do with Georgia, or the facts on the ground with respect to the Ossetians or Abkhazians, but everything to do with Russia. That this red line may now have to undergo slight adjustments to reflect the new facts is perhaps as much a problem of saving political face, even face for career diplomats, as it is one of looking realistic and sensible.

Future prospects are a bit more difficult to predict than the preceding long-term results, but given the past as a guide one can make some reasonable extrapolations. First, the West will perpetuate instability by ignoring facts on the ground. As long as the current red line (or perhaps one somewhat like it) is not crossed by Russian troops, the welfare of Georgians, Ossetians, and Abkhazians, and the stability of the region are quite secondary. Second, Russia and Georgia will continue their mutual antipathy, so long as Saakashvili remains in power. The Kremlin may entertain the notion that a different Georgian leader might be more accommodating, but given the bad history between the two nations there is little guarantee that Saakashvili's successor would be any more open to Russian interests or influence than the current president. Simply put, Georgia's interests and Russia's do not align and will remain opposed on most matters. Third, Russian domination of Abkhazia will be strong because there is no alternative source of support for that small nation, but if Russian influence is shaped to meet some of Abkhazia's needs, the relationship may bring benefits to both sides. Abkhaz interests align with Russia's to a limited extent, but are more crucially linked to those of the Circassians in the North West Caucasus and in the diaspora, that is, with North West Caucasian interests and stability generally. Abkhazia can play a stabilizing role on the North West Caucasus if Russia acts wisely and accommodates crucial Abkhazian financial and cultural interests. Fourth, South Ossetia will eventually join North Ossetia. Fifth, the precedent of recognition might alter the nature of the Russian Federation by offering such regions as Chechnia and Tatarstan a more independent relationship with Moscow, but this would mean little in tangible economic terms without some major change in the fortunes of Eurasia. Sixth, Russia may have stabilized the Caucasus (except for Nagorno Karabagh), much as the European Union and the United States may have stabilized the Balkans with Kosovo's recognition. Seventh, Turkey may utilize her North West Caucasian diaspora to promote investment, trade, and cultural ties. Finally, Turkey can set a standard for the new reality in the South Caucasus by reaching an understanding with Georgia on commercial ventures across the region.

To speculate further on the future of the region, certain facts in the ground must be acknowledged by all concerned. First, the fear of extinction must not be underestimated by any and all parties, particularly such fears as harbored by the Abkhazians and South Ossetians, but also even by the Georgians. This is the central fact. Second, South Ossetia is not a viable state-level entity. Its future lies in incorporation, albeit such incorporation would have adverse strategic implications for the West, because it would give Russia a permanent toehold in the South Caucasus. Third, as long as the West refuses to curb Georgia's ambitions and come to terms with such facts, the West will have little influence over events in this arena. A path must be found by which the West can come to terms with the realities in the South Caucasus without losing face. As things now stand diplomatically embracing these realities would constitute a collapse of the Western position. Russia would be wise to view the

West not as an antagonist in this matter, as it now quite naturally does, but rather as a potential ally that could use some help out of a dead end.* Most accounts of Russian media treatment of South Caucasian conflicts can be found in AnaK. Niedermaier (Managing Editor) (2008) Countdown to War in Georgia, Minneapolis: Eastview Press. For a view of the West's reaction almost any media archive from August 2008 until roughly May of 2009 will suffice.† Nicolai N. Petro, "The Legal Case for Russian Intervention in Georgia," *Fordham Journal of International Law*, vol. 32, Issue 5 (Spring 2009), pp. 1524-1549.

A worst-case scenario for the South Caucasus might run as follows. Georgia becomes a perpetual fault-line for tectonic stresses between Russia and the West. Tensions with the United States will emerge in Venezuela and other parts of South America, promoted by Russia. Extreme duplicity will come to mark diplomatic efforts over Georgia. One must not forget the famous example of Napoleon's Foreign minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand (-Périgord), who said, "I speak only to deceive." Yeltsin's conduct in February 1994 offers a modern example. He signed a Friendship treaty with Georgia, shortly after she had been driven out of Abkhazia. At the same time Russia was massing forces in the North Caucasus to invade Georgia should she go back into Abkhazia. In such a political culture Abkhazia and South Ossetia will most likely remain pawns in a larger game. Only force will remain to insure the safety and stability of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Georgia. Turkey, caught in the collision between Russia and the West, will remain neutral and be shut out of the South Caucasus. Membership of Georgia in NATO, if eventually extended, might well trigger a conflict between NATO and Russia.

A best-case scenario might unfold as follows. Russia and the United States have a frank exchange regarding regional realities and the scope of territorial integrity as balanced against the need for stability in the region. The West recognizes Georgia "proper" and curbs Georgia nationalism. The West then recognizes Abkhazia. The West then works with Russia, Turkey, and Abkhazia on diaspora issues to help stabilize the North West Caucasus before the Sochi Olympics. South Ossetia remains a trickier issue. It is useful only for the Roki Tunnel. The Roki Tunnel is antiquated and vulnerable, as mentioned above. As long as Russia and Ukraine fail to reach accord on Sevastopol, South Ossetia and its tunnel will remain vital to Russia's ambitions. Georgia's sovereignty ultimately will be acknowledged by both Russia and the West, and guaranteed with strong language in a treaty. Regions of "peripheral interest" must be acknowledged and negotiated, simply because geography is real. They need not be subservient client states. Standing bodies should be put in place by treaty to monitor issues of activity and security in these regions. The activity of a regional power need not be inimical to its periphery, but this may take some major shifts in the Kremlin's view of Russian might and prestige, along with some adjustments on the part of Washington as well. Geography dictates that peripheral zones will always exist as long as a power center exists. Peripheries are natural power vacuums in such circumstances. Without bodies to standardize center – periphery relations, a power struggle between the West/USA and Russia will emerge over these zones.

The West has "won" contests for the periphery in the Baltic and the Balkans. Russia has won the contest for the periphery in the zone of Georgia if not all of the South Caucasus. Turkey should continue to assist with capital investment in developing the North West Caucasus and Abkhazia with the aid of its large North West Caucasian diaspora. Turkey, as a counterweight to the new polarization, can show that force is not the only way to stabilize a region. Money too can work wonders.