

# The Caucasus War of August 2008

By [Christian Wipperfürth](#)

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In August 2004, Georgia had, under President Mikhail Saakashvili, already tried to occupy South Ossetia in a blitzkrieg. At that time, warnings from Western countries and massive threats from Moscow forced the rapid withdrawal of Georgian troops. However, the prospect of a common future which had developed over the previous years between Georgia on the one side and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other, had been destroyed.

In the spring of 2008, the indications were that Georgia would again launch a war. A speaker of the Russian Foreign Ministry proclaimed the country's determination to respond with armed force should Georgia attack Abkhazia or South Ossetia, and that it would do so even if Georgia were to call on NATO support. In late July 2008, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier attempted to persuade both Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia to enter into talks and to agree to a renunciation of violence. But in vain.

In early August 2008, Georgian troops attacked South Ossetia. The Russian President was on vacation, the Premier was in Peking to attend the opening of the Olympic Games, and the position of chief of the Russian military intelligence service was at that time vacant.

Although Georgian troops encountered stubborn resistance from the South Ossetians, they enjoyed massive superiority, both qualitatively and quantitatively. They moved very far forward, and were on the verge of being able to block the Roki Tunnel, the only connection between mountainous South Ossetia and Russia. However, before this could happen, Russia entered the war, with the support of almost the entire population.

Within two days after the beginning of the war, defeat was already apparent, and Georgia claimed that its own operations had been carried out in reaction to a Russian attack, a charge that won some credence in the West. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, however, traveled to Moscow to talk with President Dmitry Medvedev. Although she criticized some elements of Kremlin policy, she did state and Russia had "reacted."

Moscow was careful to limit the conflict; for example, although it could have cut off gas and electric power supplies to Georgia, it did not do so. On the other hand, however, the generals showed signs of exceeding their mandate and of wanting to deal the enemy a decisive defeat. The Kremlin had to expend considerable effort to keep a rein on its forces, which only reluctantly accepted the cease-fire negotiated by the French President, at that time the EU Council President. Five days after the war broke out, the guns fell silent. More than 1000 people had been killed.

Why did Russia enter the war? All countries in the world, including Russia, considered South Ossetia to be legally part of Georgia, although it had in fact broken away during the chaotic period that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, even a de facto regime, such as that in Taiwan, another unrecognized state, is protected by the

international prescription against violence. Hence, the invasion was illegal under international law. That was true, too, of the attack by Georgian troops on the Russian peacekeeping soldiers in South Ossetia, for their presence was legitimized by an internationally recognized treaty which Tiflis had signed. Moreover, had Russia failed to intervene, the Russian North Caucasus would probably have become uncontrollable, for there was no doubt that the compatriots of the South Ossetians in Russian North Ossetia were both willing and able to engage in a stubborn battle against Georgia. Georgia would not have been able to pacify Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Kremlin would also have had to fear a considerable international loss of prestige, had it failed to act.

The same was true of the United States: the US Secretary of State in September spoke of Russian “bullying.” At the same time, the proponents of a hard line against Russia were forced into the defensive: the US Secretary of Defense distanced himself from the words of his cabinet colleague. Germany, against the resistance of such countries as Poland, was successful in getting an EU investigative commission established to look into the background of the Caucasus War. It came to the conclusion, in agreement with the German position, that while Russia had “reacted,” it had also “overreacted.” The U.S. Congress initially refused to pass the laws necessary to permit US astronauts to use Russian rockets to fly to the international space station, but by the end of September had given in on that point. In October, there was even a joint exercise by the Italian and Russian navies.

Two weeks after the end of the war, Medvedev emphasized that Russia wanted no confrontation with any country, and desired peaceful relations with the EU, the US and “others” – in that order; he did not mention China. However, he did say that the protection of its own citizens, regardless of their place of residence, was a priority for Russia, and moreover that Russia had regions of “privileged interests.” The two latter statements sparked concerns that the Kremlin might become aggressive in the future. For instance, the eastern Ukraine and northern Kazakhstan are home to over ten million Russians. However, Russia is not pursuing a revisionist policy. The formulation “sphere of privileged interests,” not common in diplomatic jargon, has not been repeated in official parlance, and neither Medvedev nor Putin have ever referred to “spheres of influence.”

However, there have been continual controversies over the implementation of the cease-fire of August 2008. Moreover, by recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia has isolated itself internationally, and constricted options for negotiation for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. On the other hand, American willingness to let itself be used by Saakashvili decreased noticeably under President Obama.

In the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2012, Saakashvili’s party suffered a resounding defeat, and Georgian-Russian relations have become markedly less tense under the new Premier Bidzina Ivanishvili. Georgia has announced that it will take part in the Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014, and bilateral trade relations are resuming. Saakashvili, who is still Georgia’s president (although not for much longer), has remained true to his style. He recently announced on TV, “We have political parties which are being openly financed from Russia and they don’t even hide it, and parroting their [Russian] propaganda... They gave leader of [Georgian Dream coalition Bidzina Ivanishvili], which won the elections, \$2 billion.”

Ivanishvili is indeed transmitting extremely friendly signals, for example: “There is a nostalgic sentiment in Russia for Georgia, and there is a nostalgic sentiment also in Georgia for the Russian people.” However, the new government, too, is not been reconciled to its loss of territory, and is not willing to sign a nonaggression pact, even though the signs of the

times favor detente. This should first of all benefit the refugees: over 200,000 Georgians had to flee from Abkhazia and South Ossetia at the beginning of the 1990s and in 2008, and 100,000 Ossetians had to flee from Georgia.

**Dr. Christian Wipperfurth** is a freelancer and consultant. He lectures and writes on Russia's Foreign and Energy Politics. Between 2001-2004 he served as Assistant Professor in the Faculty for International Relations, St. Petersburg State University (Russia) with emphases on questions of international relations, Russian and German foreign politics, and Russia's relationship with the EU and NATO. Between 1999-2001 he completed his Ph.D. Thesis (in History) and prior to that (1992-1998) he worked for the European Parliament vis-a-vis the Deutscher Bundestag.

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