

Using Georgia to Target Russia

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Global Research, August 13, 2008

13 August 2008

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

After the Soviet Union's 1991 dissolution, Georgia's South Ossetia province broke away and declared its independence. So far it remains undiplomatically recognized by UN member states. It's been traditionally allied with Russia and wishes to reunite with Northern Ossetes in the North Ossetia-Alania Russian republic. Nothing so far is in prospect, but Russia appears receptive to the idea. And for Abkhazia as well, Georgia's other breakaway province. The conflict also has implications for Transdniestria, the small independent Russian-majority part of Moldova bordering Ukraine, and for Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan.

Tensions arose and conflict broke out in late 1991. It resulted in a 1992 ceasefire to avoid a major confrontation with Russia, but things remained unsettled. Moscow maintains a military presence in the province as well as in Abkhazia and exerts considerable political and economic influence. Throughout the 1990s, intermittent conflict erupted but nothing on the order of early August 7 when Georgia acted with aggression against the S. Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali.

Russiatoday.com reported the early timeline:

- at 22:50 GMT, Tskhinvali reported heavy shelling;
- 22:00 GMT - TASS news agency reported intensive Georgian firing on the capital's residential areas;
- 21:27 GMT - Russia's Vesti television reported that S. Ossetia's military downed a Georgian attack plane;
- 21:25 GMT - Georgia announced plans to withdraw half its Iraq forces because of the conflict;
- 21:22 GMT - S. Ossetia claimed to be in control of Tskhinvali, but Georgian forces attempted to retake the city;
- 20:36 GMT - The UN Security Council began closed-door discussions on the conflict - initiated by Georgia and the second in 24 hours;
- 20:25 GMT - Georgia asked the US to pressure Russia to "stop (its) armed aggression;"
- 19:08 GMT - Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said "Russia is taking adequate military and political measures" to end the violence;
- 18:56 GMT - S. Ossetia's government said it controls Tskhinvali, but fighting in one city

district continued;

— 17:35 GMT - Georgian President Saakashvili claimed that Georgia controlled Tskhinvali and most S. Ossetian villages and regions;

— 17:20 GMT - S. Ossetian leader Kokoity asked the world community to stop Georgia's "genocide" and recognize the territory's independence; he claimed 1400 deaths in the fighting;

— 16:46 GMT - thousands of S. Osettians fled the fighting;

— 16:14 GMT - Russia's Air Force denied bombing a Georgian military base;

— 14:23 GMT - reports from Tskhinvali indicated mass fires in the city;

— 13:25 GMT - Russia's Defence Ministry accused Georgian troops of shooting peacekeepers and civilians and denying them medical help;

— 13:16 GMT - Saakashvili accused Russia of waging war and asked for US support;

— 12:55 GMT - Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov accused Georgia of ethnic cleansing Ossetian villages;

— 12:04 GMT - Russia's Defence Ministry said it sent peacekeeping reinforcements to S. Ossetia;

— 11:25 GMT - reports indicated that Tskhinvali was completely destroyed;

— 10:33 GMT - Georgia announced a three-hour ceasefire to let civilians evacuate the conflict zone;

— 9:36 GMT - Russia's Parliament cited Georgia's aggression as a "serious reason" to recognize S. Ossetian independence;

— 8:18 GMT - firefights spread to Tskhinvali streets;

— 6:51 GMT - the UN Security Council failed to approve a Russia-sponsored ceasefire call; fighting intensified;

— 5:01 GMT - S. Ossetia sought Russian protection and help to stop the fighting; and

— 4:13 GMT - Georgian troops resumed attacking Tskhinvali in a continued act of aggression; things remained unsettled; fighting continued and at times with ferocity.

On August 8, The New York Times reported that Georgia officials "accused Russia (on August 5) of violating the country's airspace and firing a guided missile...." Russia denied the charge, called it baseless, and said no Russian planes were in the area either August 4 or 5th. Georgia, on the other hand, said they were as a "provocation aimed only" to disrupt Georgia's peace and "change the political course of the country."

Earlier in March, Georgia accused Russia of launching missile attacks on Georgian villages in the volatile Kodori Gorge. Relations deteriorated markedly last year after Georgia arrested and deported four Russian Army officers, accusing them of spying. Moscow recalled its

ambassador, cut air, sea and postal links, and deported several thousand Georgians in response. These events and others led up to the present conflict with considerable suspicions about what's behind them. The New York Times reported (August 10) that conflict had been brewing for years but suggested Russia is at fault:

- emboldened by its Chechnya successes;
- the Kremlin's loathing of President Saakashvili - personally and politically;
- tensions over Washington's ties with him - providing political, economic and especially military support, including a total overhaul of its forces complete with large stockpiles state-of-the-art weapons and munitions as well as training to use them;
- Saakashvili's alliance with the Bush administration in Iraq; and
- President Putin granting citizenship and passports to most S. Ossetian and Abkhazian adults.

Unmentioned by The Times are:

- reasons behind the growing tensions between Washington and Moscow;
- the Bush administration's unilateral abandonment of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM);
- its continued provocations around the world, including in areas sensitive to Russia;
- its massive military buildup;
- its advocacy for preventive, preemptive and "proactive" wars with first-strike nuclear weapons;
- NATO's role in serving America's imperial interests;
- enlarging it with new member states, including former Soviet republics;
- encircling Russia with US military bases;
- situating them in former Soviet republics and regional states;
- the strategic importance of Georgia for the Anglo-American Caspian oil pipeline; its extension from Baku, Azerbaijan (on the Caspian) through Georgia (well south of S. Ossetia), bypassing Russia and Iran, and across Turkey to its port city of Ceyhan - the so-called BTC pipeline for around one million barrels of oil daily, adjacent to the South Caspian (gas) Pipeline with a capacity of about 16 billion cubic meters annually;
- the regional stakes involved: Washington and Russia vying to control Eurasia's vast oil and gas reserves;
- Israel's role in the region; its interest in the BTC pipeline; its negotiations with Georgia, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan to have it reach its Ashkelon oil terminal and Red Sea Eilat port; its selling Georgia state-of-the-art weapons, electronic warfare systems and intelligence; its use of military advisors to train Georgian forces in commando, air, sea,

armored and artillery tactics as well as instruction on military intelligence and security;

— its refusal to freeze its Georgian military alliance; the dubious reliability of Haaretz citing an AP August 7 report that “Israel has decided to halt all sales of military equipment to Georgia because of (Russia’s) objections....to give Israel leverage with Moscow....not to ship arms and equipment to Iran” such as sophisticated S-300 air defense missiles; the Israeli Foreign Ministry refusing comment on an arms freeze and Georgian Cabinet minister Temur Yakobashvili saying “There has been no decision by Israel to stop selling (us) weapons;”

— believe it, and here’s what Haaretz says Israel supplies: high-tech infantry weapons, artillery systems electronics, and upgrades for Soviet-designed Su-25 ground attack jets as well as Israeli generals advising Georgia’s military; Israel also sells Hermes 450 UAV spy drones according to Russiatoday.com; according to some sources, it’s a virtual gold mine for Israeli defense contractors, but Haaretz reports it’s much less at around \$200 million a year - well below American and French sales;

— on August 10, the Israeli ynetnews.com highlighted “The Israeli Connection” and reported “Israeli companies have been helping (the) Georgian army (prepare) for war against Russia through arms deals, training of infantry and security advice;” it was helped by Georgian citizens “who immigrated to Israel and became businesspeople,” and the fact that Georgia’s Defense Minister, Davit Kezerashvili, “is a former Israeli fluent in Hebrew (whose) door was always open to the Israelis who came and offered his country arms;” deals went through “fast” and included “remote-piloted (Elbit System) vehicles (RPVs), automatic turrets for armed vehicles, antiaircraft systems, communications systems, shells and rockets;”

— Russia’s anger over Georgia and Ukraine seeking NATO membership and Washington’s pressuring other members to admit them;

- the planned installation of “missile defense” radar in the region - in Poland, Czechoslovakia and potentially other sensitive areas, all targeting Russia, China, and Iran;

— its provoking Russia to retarget nuclear missiles at planned “radar” locations; and

— targeting Russia for dissolution (as the US’s main world rival), diffuse its power, control Eurasia, including the country’s immense resources on the world’s by far largest land mass.

The New Great Game

What’s at stake is what former National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski described in his 1997 book “The Grand Chessboard.” He called Eurasia the “center of world power extending from Germany and Poland in the East through Russia and China to the Pacific and including the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent.” He continued: “The most immediate (US) task is to make certain that no state or combination of states gains the capacity to expel the United States from Eurasia or even to diminish significantly its decisive arbitration role.” Dominating that part of the world and its vast energy and other resources is Washington’s goal with NATO and Israel its principal tools to do it:

— in the Middle East with its two-thirds of the world’s proved oil reserves (about 675 billion barrels); and

— the Caspian basin with an estimated 270 billion barrels of oil plus one-eighth of the

world's natural gas reserves.

"New World Order" strategy aims to secure them. Russia, China, and Iran have other plans. India allies with both sides. Former Warsaw Pact and Soviet republics split this way:

— NATO members include the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania;

— Georgia and Ukraine seek membership; while

— Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgystan ally with Russia.

Georgia now occupies center stage, so first some background about a nation Michel Chossudovsky calls "an outpost of US and NATO forces" located strategically on Russia's border "within proximity of the Middle East Central Asian war theater." Breakaway S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, though small in size, are very much players in what's unfolding with potential to have it develop into something much bigger than a short-lived regional conflict.

In 2003 with considerable CIA help, Georgia's President Saakashvili came to power in the so-called bloodless "Rose Revolution." Georgia held parliamentary elections on November 2. International observers called them unfair. Saakashvili claimed he won. He and the united opposition called for protests and civil disobedience. They began in mid-November in the capital Tbilisi, then spread throughout the country. They peaked on November 22, the scheduled opening day for parliament. Instead, Saakashvili-led supporters placed "roses" in the barrels of soldiers' rifles, seized the parliament building, interrupted President Eduard Shevardnadze's speech, and forced him to escape for his safety.

Saakashvili declared a state of emergency, mobilized troops and police, met with Shevardnadze and Zurab Zhvania (the former parliament speaker and choice for new prime minister), and apparently convinced the Georgian president to resign. Celebrations erupted. A temporary president was installed. Georgia's Supreme Court annulled the elections, and on January 4, 2004, Saakashvili was elected and inaugurated president on January 25. New parliamentary elections were held on March 28. Saakashvili's supporters used heavy-handed tactics to gain full control, but behind the scenes Washington is fully in charge. It pulls the strings on its new man in Georgia and stepped up tensions with Russia for control of the strategically important southern Caucasus region.

On January 5, 2008, Saakashvili won reelection for a second term in a process his opponents called rigged. Given how he first gained power and the CIA's role in it, those accusations have considerable merit.

After the outbreak of the current crisis, Russia's NATO envoy, Dmitry Rogozin, accused the Alliance of "encourag(ing) Georgia to attack S. Ossetia and called it "an undisguised aggression accompanied by a mass propagand war." Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, called attention to Georgia's "massive arms purchasing....during several years" and its use of "foreign specialists" to train "Georgian special troops."

In his August 10 article titled - "War in the Caucasus: Towards a Broader Russia-US Military Confrontation?" - Chossudovsky notes how the "attacks were timed to coincide with the Olympics largely with a view to avoiding frontpage media coverage" and to let saturation Beijing reports serve as distraction.

Now after days of fighting, headlines cite 2000 or more deaths (largely civilians), huge amounts of destruction, Tskhinvali in ruins, and many thousands of refugees seeking safe havens. Accounts of Georgian atrocities have also surfaced, and according to Chossudovsky they're part of a planned "humanitarian disaster (against civilian targets) rather than (an impossible to achieve) military victory" against a nation as powerful as Russia. Had Georgia sought control, a far different operation would have unfolded "with Special Forces occupying key public buildings, communications networks and provincial institutions."

So why did this happen, and what can Washington hope to gain when it's bogged down in two wars, threatening another against Iran, and thoroughly in disrepute as a result? It's part of a broader "Great Game" strategy pitting the world's two great powers against each other for control of this vital part of the world.

Bush administration plans may come down to this - portray Russia as another Serbia, isolate the country, and equate Putin and/or Medvedev with Milosevic and hope for all the political advantage it can gain. "The war on Southern Ossetia," according to Chossudovsky, "was not meant to be won, leading to the restoration of Georgian sovereignty over (the province). It was intended to destabilize the region while triggering a US-NATO confrontation with Russia."

Georgia is its proxy. Its attack on S. Ossetia is a made-in-Washington operation. But not according to George Bush (on August 10) who "strongly condemned (Russia's) disproportionate response," and Dick Cheney (on the same day) saying its military "aggression must not go unanswered, and that its continuation would have serious consequences for its relations with the United States, as well as the broader international community." An EU statement agreed. It expressed its "commitment to the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Georgia" and pretty much accused Russia of aggression.

Russia's response and capabilities are unsurprising. It counterattacked in force, battered Georgian troops, inflicted damage at will, reportedly overran the Gori military base in Senaki, moved south into Georgia proper, and largely attacked military targets with great effect. It also wants an emergency meeting with NATO and issued an ultimatum for Georgian troops to disarm in the Zugdidi District along the Abkhazia - Georgia border. For its part, Georgian officials said Russia's "wide-scale assault (is) aimed at overthrowing the government."

On August 10, the London Guardian reported that the Caucasus conflict "spread to Georgia's second breakaway province of Abkhazia, where separatist rebels and the Russian air force launched an all-out attack on Georgian forces." Abkhazia's leader, Sergei Bagapsh, said "around 1000 Abkhaz troops" engaged in a major "military operation" to force Georgian forces out of the strategic Kodori gorge. Russian army spokesman, Anatoly Nogovitsyn, told Interfax: "We do not intend to take the initiative in escalating the conflict in this region. We are primarily interested in" stabilizing Abkhazia.

On August 12, AP reported that "Russian President Dmitri Medvedev ordered a halt to military action in Georgia (today), saying it had punished (the country) and brought security for civilians and Russian peacekeepers." Nonetheless, reports are that fighting continues, and Medvedev ordered his military to quell "any emerging hotbeds of resistance or any aggressive actions..." Foreign Minister Lavrov added that Moscow won't talk to Saakashvili and said he'd "better go."

The latest AP August 13 report is that Georgian officials claim Russian tanks “seized a (Georgian) military base (and) also held onto ground in western Georgia, maintaining control of the town of Zugdidi.” For its part, “Russia accused Georgia of killing more than 2000 people, mostly civilians, in South Ossetia.” Witnesses confirmed that hundreds had died there, and expectations are that the death toll will rise “because large areas of Georgia (are) too dangerous for journalists to enter (to assess) the true scope of the damage.”

On the Attack - The Corporate Media React

Despite the Olympic distraction, the dominant media jumped on this story and are unsurprisingly one-sided in their reports. On August 11, a New York Times editorial headlined “Russia’s War of Ambition” in which it lamented that Saakashvili “foolishly and tragically baited the Russians - or even more foolishly fell into Moscow’s trap....” It accused the Kremlin of “bull(ying) and blackmail(ing) its neighbors and its own people.” It stated “There is no imaginable excuse for (invading) Georgia” and defended “Saakashvili’s ‘democratically elected’ government.”

It accused Vladimir Putin of “shoulder(ing) aside (Medvedev) to run the war (and) appears determined to reimpose by force and intimidation as much of the old Soviet sphere of influence as he can get away with.” The US and its European allies “must tell Mr. Putin in the clearest possible terms that such aggression will not be tolerated.” They’ll also “need to take a hard look at their relationship with Russia going forward....Russia needs to behave responsibly. And the United States and Europe must make clear that anything less is unacceptable.”

The Los Angeles Times’ op-ed writer Max Boot (noted for his hard-right views) was just as one-sided in referring to the “Red Army” and saying the West must “Stand up to Russia.” It must protect Saakashvili and prevent Moscow from “replac(ing) him with a pro-Kremlin stooge.” Its leaders must “stand together and make clear that this aggression will not stand.” He called Russia’s “excuses” for its “aggression....particularly creepy” and said they mirrored Hitler’s when he “swallow(ed) Czechoslovakia and Poland.” He added that “the lesson” of the 1930s must be heeded because the “cost of inaction” is too high.

David Clark in the London Guardian was also hostile in his op-ed headlined “The west can no longer stand idle while the Russian bully wreaks havoc.” He described “Russian policy (as) uniquely destructive in generating instability and political division in the Caucasus” and excused Saakashvili for his actions. He referred to “Georgia’s role in maintaining the only east-west pipeline route free of Russia’s monopolistic grip....” He called Georgia’s security concerns “real, and Russia is the cause.” David Clark is a former government adviser and now chairman of the pro-West Russia Foundation.

The Wall Street covers this story daily in news reports and commentaries. On August 11, it gave Saakashvili a half page for his op-ed headlined “The War in Georgia Is a War for the West,” and he didn’t mince words. He accused Russia of “waging (all-out) war on my country (that’s) not of Georgia’s making (nor its) choice. The Kremlin designed this war....(it’s) a war about (Georgia’s) independence and future (and) about the future of freedom in Europe.”

On August 12, writers Gary Schmitt and Mauro De Lorenzo headlined “How the West Can Stand up to Russia,” and they were just as hostile. They accused Moscow of “cutthroat politics....at home and abroad” and asked “What can the West do?” First they urge

“rush(ing) military and medical supplies to Tbilisi (and) Washington should lead.” It should then tell Moscow that the West has a “greater capacity to sustain a new Cold War (and aim) to put Mr. Putin and Dmitry Medvedev on their back foot diplomatically.”

Then on to the larger issue of “break(ing) Russia’s “stranglehold on Europe’s energy supplies” and one other thing – building a “strong, prosperous and fully independent Georgia (heading for) NATO and EU membership” allied against Russia.

The Journal’s same day editorial headlined “Vladimir Bonaparte” after one day earlier accusing Moscow of “Kremlin (business) Capers” and admonishing investors against “putting money into Russia.” On the 12th, it warned that “Georgia is only the first stop for Eurasia’s new imperialist.” It referred to Putin “consolidat(ing) his authoritarian transition as Prime Minister with a figurehead president....Ukraine is in his sights, and even the Balkan states could be threatened if he’s allowed to get away with it. The West needs to draw a line at Georgia.”

It called on NATO to “respond forcefully....start today (and said) this is perhaps the last chance for President Bush to salvage any kind of positive legacy toward Russia (by) rally(ing) the West’s response.” Putin seeks to “dominat(e)....the world stage. Unless Russians see that there are costs for their Napoleon’s expansionism, Georgia isn’t likely to be his last stop.”

Welcome to the new Cold War and new Great Game, what a new administration will inherit next year, and the very worrisome thought that it will handle things no better than the current one no matter who’s elected or which party controls Congress.

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