
Seven Questions : Russia's Big Mistake

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Think Russia is the big winner in Georgia? Think again: Regional expert and CIA veteran Paul A. Goble explains how Moscow has shot itself in the foot by recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia and why Russia's nouveau riche might be the ones who pull the Kremlin back from the brink.

Foreign Policy: There's still a lot of debate about just who started the war in Georgia. Russia, of course, claims that Georgia started it, and Georgia says it was provoked by shelling from South Ossetia. Many others see Georgia falling into a long-planned Russian trap. What's your view? What do you think provoked this war?

Paul Goble: Well, there are two different questions: what provoked this war and what caused it. After the NATO summit in Bucharest, when the United States indicated it would press for Georgia to be included in NATO, the Russian government, as Mr. Putin indicated at the time, was sufficiently angry that Moscow began planning to be able to use force at some point. I believe that [Georgian President Mikheil] Saakashvili gave Moscow the occasion for the use of such force. Had Saakashvili not moved in the way that he did, it would have been far more difficult for Moscow to present itself as acting within the limits of its [peacekeeping] mandate.

However, once the Russian government moved beyond the borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and once it moved into parts of Georgia that had never been in dispute, this was an act of Russian aggression, even if the trigger was an unfortunate miscalculation by Tbilisi.

FP: Russian President Dmitry Medvedev writes in Wednesday's Financial Times that he chose to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia because "some nations find it impossible to live under the tutelage of another" and because he couldn't "tell the Abkhazians and South Ossetians... that what was good for the Kosovo Albanians was not good for them." What do you make of his argument?

PG: Moscow's effort to blame the West and blame NATO action in recognizing Kosovo doesn't cut as much ice as I think Moscow expected, but the Russian government continues to make it. It's significant that the Serbians are very, very unhappy, because in Georgia Russia is doing exactly what it denounced in Kosovo.

Medvedev's comment can be played elsewhere as well. The country in Eurasia that has the most people who would like to be independent is not Georgia--it is the Russian Federation. In the words of one Chechen I saw quoted the other day, "Are we any worse than the Abkhazians?" So, Medvedev has unsheathed a sword that has two edges.

FP: Medvedev also writes, "In international relations, you cannot have one rule for some and another rule for others."

PG: Well, he's just done that, hasn't he? He said there's one rule for Abkhazians and there's another rule for Chechens. I have yet to see a convincing argument on how those two crises are in principle different.

The Russian government is basically saying, "If you're friends with us, we'll support territorial integrity; if you're not friends with us, we will support

self-determination for minorities." That is a pretty heavy-handed approach, and it's one that at, least so far, isn't getting much positive support around the world. Indeed, in the first 24 hours, the only political leadership in the world that has supported Russia is Hamas, and that's hardly much of a recommendation.

FP: So, what's the difference between Kosovo and Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

PG: I'm not an expert on Yugoslavia, but what I see is the following. The first difference is that Kosovo did not become a client state of someone else. It did not get absorbed by Albania, as Serbs and Russians said would happen at the time. With all due respect, the governments in South Ossetia and to a lesser extent Abkhazia are clearly client states. The South Ossetian government says whatever Moscow wants to be said, and you don't have that in Kosovo.

The second difference is that nobody went in and said, "We have international peacekeeping responsibilities, and now we're going to put our forces in so we can recognize this place." That's in effect what the Russians did.

FP: But if the South Ossetians and the Abkhazians don't want to be part of Georgia, why should the West support President Saakashvili's position? Why is it a good idea to support Georgia's "territorial integrity"?

PG: Since 1932--since the Stimson Doctrine was articulated when the Japanese seized Manchuria and transformed it into "Manchukuo" as a client state--it has been (largely) consistent American policy that the United States does not recognize territorial change achieved by an act of aggression. So, the issue is not, as the Russians have put it, between simple territory integrity or the right of nations to self-determination. It is whether the United States and Western governments will accept border changes brought about by the use of force. And that's what has happened in this instance.

FP: What about Azerbaijan, which has the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave? Should Azerbaijan worry about being next on Moscow's hit list?

PG: Russian policy in this region is vastly more variegated than we assume. What Russia will do to promote its interests in Ukraine or Azerbaijan or Georgia are three different things.

For one thing, the Azerbaijanis have a lot more money than the Georgians do, and they've invested more in their military. Azerbaijan is far more concerned about being able to ship its oil across Georgian territory through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline than almost anything else. Earlier in the week when that pipeline was not working, Azerbaijan was sending oil through Russia to Novorossiisk, which of course gave Russia a hold, and it was also sending oil south across Iran, an action I suspect a large number of American officials would have problems with.

What Moscow may do either in eastern Ukraine or especially in Crimea is very different than what it has done in Georgia--not only because Ukraine is a lot bigger. It's really only the Americans who seem to think that all these countries are somehow branch offices. Russia has a very, very good set of experts who understand just how different these places are.

Now, the domestic reaction in Russia hasn't gotten a lot of attention, but you've got people speaking out. You've had demonstrations against the war. You've got soldiers' mothers' committees going to court because the Russian Defense Ministry lied and said that there would be no draftees used in combat, which they were. Boris Nemtsov, the opposition leader, reportedly wrote on his blog that if Moscow continues on the path it is now, "Russia and Russians will suffer even more."

FP: But this is a minority viewpoint, right?

PG: I'm not suggesting that if a vote were taken tomorrow, Russians would vote down what Putin and Medvedev have done. But it's wrong to assume that every Russian thinks this was the greatest act of statecraft in the history of the world. There are a lot of people who don't, and while I don't think they set the weather, to ignore the role they play is a mistake.

I believe that one of the reasons the fighting stopped was not because there weren't people in the defense ministry who thought it should go on for a bit longer, but because in the first two working days of the war, there was a total of some \$8 billion net capital outflow from Russia. You're talking about serious consequences for wealthy Russians, and they matter a whole lot more than the soldiers' mothers' committees or Boris Nemtsov or Garry Kasparov.

Because of this war, Russians are no longer going to be as welcome in foreign countries. We're probably going to see the spread of what is an unfortunate thing: In Germany and France, Europeans are now choosing to go on trips to resorts that the tour operators promise are "Russian free." In human terms, that's ugly, but in collective terms that's a source of enormous pressure.

Polls tell us that for many Russians, the single most important right they acquired after 1991 was the right to travel. If getting a visa becomes more difficult, Russians are going to have a harder time moving about. It's going to be harder to get their children into elite international schools. There's going to be less money around. So, there's probably a constituency, and a pretty large one among an influential group of people, who are going to go to the Russian government and say, "You're hitting us where it matters most: in our pocketbooks." And that's a source of influence that should not be discounted at all.

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