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## Both sides are to blame for the crisis in the Caucasus

By James Nixey  
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Simplistic analyses won't help us understand this conflict or prevent another one, says James Nixey

The past month has seen a deluge of ill-informed comment on the conflagration in the Caucasus in - but by no means limited to - the Guardian. Even Peter Wilby's otherwise excellent article (Georgia is winning the PR war, Media, August 18) on the imbalance (pro-Georgian, anti-Russian) in western media reporting failed to mention massive provocation by Russia prior to Georgia's foolish, possibly criminal, incursion into South Ossetia on August 7. For a fuller picture still, one would have to look at Ossetian treatment by the Georgians in the past 17 years, and by the Russians in the previous seven decades - none of it particularly humane.

While David Miliband has unequivocally defended Georgia at every stage - a bad, one-sided policy - Nick Brown has equally blindly defended Russia, asking "do we really mean to commit ourselves to all-out war against the Russian Federation if something like this happens again?" (Comment, August 20). This shows a breathtaking lack of understanding of the implications of and mechanisms involved in Nato membership. Brown went on to say: "I don't favour that approach, and I don't know anyone who does." That he doesn't know anyone who does simply reflects the former agriculture minister's lack of engagement with regional experts and lack of expertise.

It is misleading to portray just Georgian or just Russian culpability as the end of the matter. A shame, then, that most commentators simply fit the conflict into pre-existing mindsets such as "this is not a story of Russian aggression" (Seamus Milne, August 14), "democratic Georgia" (Leader, August 12) or "Nato is useless" (Simon Jenkins, August 20) - all simplistic and partisan.

Milne even went so far as to say: "If Georgia had been a member of Nato, this week's conflict would have risked a far sharper escalation." Perhaps. But it must be equally conceivable that were Georgia in Nato then the security architecture that this requires (whether Georgia has it or not is another matter) is designed to prevent such a flare-up. That he also believes Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in a "western-backed coup" - the mythical Russian version of events - is laughable to anyone who has closely followed the wobbly progress of this country.

Jonathan Steele, a far more seasoned Russia watcher than the any of those writers previously mentioned, gets into difficulty when he tries to be even-handed, conceding in one line that "Russia cannot have a veto on [Nato] membership" (August 25) but spending the rest of his lengthy article arguing that "Nato must not be expanded further". How he can reconcile this contradiction goes unexplained. For Steele, the relationship with Russia is just too important for the west to damage it by admitting Georgia (or Ukraine) into Nato under any circumstances. But that amounts to a veto.

The balance of the (large) overall quantity of articles in the Guardian is admirable. The problem is the imbalance within many of the articles themselves, written by analysts or politicians with personal and political agendas.

The fact is that both sides, with their excessive nationalist instincts, share enormous culpability for this tragedy. Recognising this in the west may

go some way towards developing a policy that prevents it being a recurring one.

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