

---

# Paul Gobles' Window On Eurasia - Georgian Crisis

Georgian daily - 14/8/2008

---

IN THIS ISSUE

- Was There a Russian Intelligence Failure in Georgia?
- Will the CIS Become a Collateral Victim of Russian Aggression?
- Russian TV's Distorted Coverage of Georgia Forces Many to Turn to Internet, Western Broadcasts
- Russian Actions in Georgia Destabilizing the North Caucasus
- How Well Have Russian Forces Performed in Georgia?

Was There a Russian Intelligence Failure in Georgia?

August 13, 2008

Russia's intelligence services failed to detect and warn Moscow's top leaders about Georgian plans to send forces into South Ossetia, a shortcoming that cannot be covered up by Vladimir Putin's decision to hand out awards to more than 50 FSB, SVR, and GRU officers, according to a Russian analyst who tracks that country's security community.

Indeed, Vladimir Yermolin writes in an article posted on the Grani.ru portal today, these awards are the height of hypocrisy because they have being given "for the timely and precise supply by the intelligence services of various levels of the General Staff of the Armed Forces and consequently of the country's leadership"

(<http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/p.139995.html>).

The course of events suggests that no such information was provided, at least in a timely fashion. "The introduction of Georgian units into the unrecognized republic [of South Ossetia] was, judging by Moscow's reaction political and military, sudden." In fact, he notes, Moscow dredged up the term "from distant 1941" - "perfidious attack" - to describe it.

Georgia's quick moves clearly caught Russian peacekeeping forces there off guard. They were soon trapped, without a chance for "a timely withdrawal or assistance" for almost a day. They had to burn secret documents lest they fall into Georgian hands. And the only person who did flee in a timely manner was republic President Eduard Kokoita.

Clearly, tactical intelligence broke down, Yermolin argues, but so too did strategic intelligence at the level of Russia's national command center. On August 8th, President Dmitry Medvedev was at a recreation facility in Samara oblast, while Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Russian Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev were at the Beijing Olympics.

They clearly had not been given a head's up about what the Georgians were about to do, Yermolin suggests, or at least one of them - perhaps Patrushev - would have been in Moscow or at a military facility in the North Caucasus Military District.

Thus, Yermolin continues, it turns out that "it is easier to spy in Senegal than in Georgia." Or "in a word, neither from Tbilisi, nor from the observation posts, nor from the raids of special forces, nor from the air, nor from the cosmos, nor from our remarkable 'spies,' nor from anywhere else came to Moscow the signal about the invasion being planned."

Indeed, as far as one can tell, Yermolin suggests, those who were watching television or listening to the radio may have known about Georgian plans at nearly the same instant that Medvedev, Putin the other senior leaders in Moscow did, a serious intelligence failure given Russian involvement in the region.

The only place where the security agencies demonstrated their "skills" during the start of this crisis was in seizing "Georgian spies in Moscow." With regard to providing the kind of warning intelligence services are supposed to provide, they did "not a thing if one judges by the results."

What might have happened in the Russian intelligence services had worked more effectively? Moscow could have raised an alarm diplomatically and reinforced its position on the ground in Ossetia militarily. Tbilisi would certainly have denied that it planned to do anything and complained yet again about what Moscow was doing.

But - and in Yermolin's view, this is the important thing - with good intelligence, Moscow would not have yielded the initiative to the Georgians and would thus have been in a position to defend Russia's interests in the region with much less loss of life and much less loss of its political position.

There is of course one possible justification for Putin to hand out these awards to his colleagues in the intelligence business: Some of them may have been involved in "convincing the Georgian leader and his generals that Moscow would not risk introducing forces on the territory of Georgia." For such an effort, Yermolin says, it is of course "possible to give awards."

Will the CIS Become a Collateral Victim of Russian Aggression?

August 12, 2008

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said today that Georgia will "finally" leave the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a way of underscoring that "the USSR will never again return." And he called on Ukraine and other countries which are now members to do the same.

Saakashvili's statement came in an emotional address to his country's parliament during which he also labeled Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia "occupation forces" ([www.rusk.ru/newsdata.php?idar=728022](http://www.rusk.ru/newsdata.php?idar=728022)). Given recent events, Saakashvili's remarks come as no surprise, but they call attention to something Moscow has been reluctant to acknowledge.

Not only have Russian actions called into question Moscow's insistence that it can be an honest broker in regional disputes and that it will operate within the principles of international law, but these actions have highlighted the new reality that many of the CIS countries are anything but enthusiastic about what Moscow has just done.

In a survey posted online yesterday, Fontanka.ru's Mariya Tsygankova pointed out that the former Soviet republics have not supported Russian actions to the extent that Moscow had hoped. Belarus and Moldova "have not supported Russia openly despite expectations" in the Russian capital that they would

do precisely that ([www.fontanka.ru/2008/08/11/124/](http://www.fontanka.ru/2008/08/11/124/)).

To no one's surprise, the three Baltic countries which are in NATO and the EU but not the CIS took the lead in condemning Moscow's actions, but Ukraine staked out a harder line than many had thought possible, Azerbaijan backed Georgia's territorial integrity, while Armenia called for vigilance in case Baku should try to exploit the situation over Karabakh.

In Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan called for consultations, while Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been silent, while Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev backed Moscow's actions ([www.politcom.ru/article.php?id=6671](http://www.politcom.ru/article.php?id=6671)) but in words that suggested he was less than fully in accord with what Moscow has done than Moscow would like, according to Tsygankova.

In short, the media commentator points out, the post-Soviet states in general and the CIS members in particular are very much divided, a reality Moscow has no interest in calling attention to and one that Saakashvili's statement today could have the effect of exacerbating at least in the short term.

The reaction of Belarus must have been especially offensive to Moscow. On the one hand, "official Minsk" in the words of Tsygankova indicated that it was most concerned about the fate of its own nationals in Georgia. And on the other, a foreign ministry spokesman called for "an immediate cease fire" and "the peaceful and civilized path" of negotiations.

Given these attitudes, it is possible that one or more of the other countries might follow Georgia out, although there is certain to be pressure from Moscow against any such step and there may be pressure from the United States as well, even against the decision that Saakashvili clearly indicates Tbilisi has already taken.

After all, Georgia did not want to join the CIS in 1991 and was more or less compelled to do so by the United States which believed that at a minimum that body could serve as a kind of divorce court or coordinating agency that would soften the landing of the Russian Federation and other countries after the break-up of the USSR.

But Moscow's actions have emboldened some in the Russian capital to look at the CIS not as a means of coping with the end of empire but as an institution that can serve as the basis for the rise of a new USSR. Indeed, one article posted on a pro-communist website today made precisely that argument ([forum.msk.ru/material/fpolitical/513099.html](http://forum.msk.ru/material/fpolitical/513099.html)).

In it, economist Vladislav Fel'dblyum argues that the post-Soviet states cannot overcome their current problems economic or political without coming back together into a single entity, one that he suggests should bear the name "the Strategic Union of Sovereign Republics" - or USSR according to the acronym of the Russian term.

Such proposals - and it is unlikely that they enjoy the support of the top Russian leaders even though Vladimir Putin has described the end of the Soviet Union as "the greatest tragedy of the 20th century - may contribute to Russian overreaching, but they will add weight to Georgian arguments that leaving the CIS is now in the best interests of some of its current members.

Russian TV's Distorted Coverage of Georgia Forces Many to Turn to Internet, Western Broadcasts

August 12, 2008

Russian television, the most influential media channel in that country, has so distorted what is taking place in Georgia in the course of its "construction" of reality there that Russians who want to know what is really happening have been forced to turn to the Internet or, as during the Cold War, to Western broadcasters such as Radio Liberty.

In an analysis which was posted on Fontanka.ru today, media critic Sergey Ilchenko observes that "facts, especially in our days, do not exist on the television screen 'in a pure form,' separate from interpretation and commentary" as Russian TV's approach to Georgia has clearly demonstrated over the last five days ([www.fontanka.ru/2008/08/12/033/](http://www.fontanka.ru/2008/08/12/033/)).

Catastrophes and conflicts, he points out, are "constructed" by television whose editors and reporters "ever more frequently appear in the role of directors of reality," as the movie "Wagging the Dog" and Russian coverage of the war in Georgia show to the satisfaction of anyone who cares to pay attention.

But what is striking, Ilchenko suggests about this, is how unoriginal Russian television has been. "The way in which leading television channels in Russia have covered military actions in South Ossetia recalls the work of TV journalists during the second Chechen campaign and the seizure of the school in Beslan."

The only difference is that "This time in the role of enemies of Russia and all progressive humanity appear not Chechen militants or abstract 'international terrorists' but Georgian soldiers and President Saakashvili personally, who has been transformed by the efforts of the domestic propaganda machine into something between Hitler and Pinochet."

Russia's military correspondents have been doing a good job, Ilchenko hastens to say, but those sitting in Moscow offices understand that "on the basis of one and the same data, contemporary television can create two totally opposite 'texts.'" If necessary, "Georgian forces in the blink of an eye can become angels" or equivalents of the "punitive agencies of the SS."

"From the very beginning," Ilchenko continues, "Russian media occupied a radically anti-Georgian position," one that was striking even though Moscow media had never been pro-Georgian. And Russian TV did everything it could to present Georgian forces as "Hitlerites" and Saakashvili as "a hysterical fuehrer."

But Russian television did more than that to distort the situation, the media critic says. It created an image of the situation in Georgia in which some kind of "dues ex machine" would have to appear - and just such a person was on offer: Vladimir Putin, who could be presented as the savior of the situation.

Because the distortions of Russian television were so obvious to anyone who cared to reflect, Zoya Svetova and Dar'ya Okunyeva of "Novyye izvestiya" write today, thoughtful Russians quickly recognized that the only place in the Russian media where there could be a serious discussion is the Internet ([www.newizv.ru/news/2008-08-12/95814/](http://www.newizv.ru/news/2008-08-12/95814/)).

"The information deficit" left by the official government media "is in part being filled by the Internet," they write. "There are sharp arguments in the blogosphere, communities of opponents and supporters of continuing military

operations are forming." And many extremely interesting and valuable pieces of reporting are contained in these online discussions.

Having noted that so far "pacifist attitudes" predominate on line, Svetova and Okunyeva point out that "net surfers, who in [Russia] do not represent more than 25 percent of the population do not set the tone." And they suggest that "in the near future one should expect not anti-war but patriotic and pro-Russian statements" to predominate there as well.

But many of the articles posted online do provide remarkable details about the situation in Georgia and the background of the current crisis. One of the more interesting offerings in this regard is by Dmitry Tayevsky, who writes for the Siberian news agency Babr.ru which is based in Irkutsk ([babr.ru/?pt=news&event=v1&IDE=46993](http://babr.ru/?pt=news&event=v1&IDE=46993)).

Among other things, he addresses the issue of the number of Russian passport holders in South Ossetia, a number that Russian officials from Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin on down have made central to their claims that this region must remain under Russian control in the future.

Not only is South Ossetia famed for continuing to use Soviet-era postage stamps - something that has attracted the interest of philatelists, but "it is curious that South Ossetia which is one of the world leaders in the production of counterfeit dollars with a great deal of humor deals with the fact of the production of [false] Russian passports in the republic."

As early as two years ago, Tayevsky says, "the entire Caucasus world laughed over the reliable but humorous report of an unknown Ossetin author in which President Kokoita, having received freshly printed passport number 2 (number one was sent as a gift to Putin) found instead of his own photograph a portrait of Abraham Lincoln taken from a one hundred dollar bill."

But there is yet another source that Russians who want to find out what is going on are turning to. When experts on the post-Soviet space at Moscow State University wanted to keep track of Georgian developments, they turned not to Russian media but to the broadcasts of U.S. funded Radio Liberty ([www.ia-centr.ru/expert/1942/](http://www.ia-centr.ru/expert/1942/)).

Tragically, instead of helping Russians who increasingly cannot learn the facts from their own media, all too many Western governments - including the U.S. - have been cutting back on such broadcasts, thereby unintentionally helping Putin and Medvedev to distort the "reality" on offer on Russian television far more easily and effectively.

Russian Actions in Georgia Destabilizing the North Caucasus

August 12, 2008

Moscow's military actions in Georgia to the surprise of no one following events in the region are destabilizing the situation in all the republics of the North Caucasus, exacerbating longstanding problems in some and creating new threats to stability and Russian control in others, according to an increasing chorus of Russian commentators.

In today's "Vremya," Ivan Sukhov is blunt about just how counterproductive Russian actions in Georgia may be in the North Caucasus, asserting that "the crisis" in Georgia now "threatens the stability" of the entire region in ways that Moscow will find very difficult to counter ([vremya.ru/2008/145/4/210203.html](http://vremya.ru/2008/145/4/210203.html)).

Pointing out that many of the borders in this region were designed by Stalin to create tensions rather than resolve them, Sukhov argues that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 destroyed the structure that held them in place and left "several ethno-territorial mines, some of which blew up already in the late 1990s."

It is critically important to recognize this reality, Sukhov says, because Moscow has generally ignored the fact that in this region borders are both barriers and bridges, barriers in the sense that they lock communities together or apart and bridges in that they permit problems in one republic under certain conditions to spread quickly to another.

Moscow has tried to control each of the republics in turn, and in recent years, it has claimed to have succeeded. But a close look at the situation, particularly in the wake of Russian military action in Georgia shows that Moscow's "successes" have been "illusory" and can disappear overnight.

The Russian government's control over Chechnya, for example, "for a long time was measured by the control of Vladimir Putin over Ramzan Kadyrov. But "the defect" of this approach was highlighted in May when "the popularity of Kadyrov ceased to grow because his co-ethnics felt his own lack of confidence" about who "the lord protector of Chechnya" now is.

Wealthy and well-placed Chechens began to cut their own deals with new groups in the Russian capital, Sukhov continues, and "young people again began to go into the mountains and Russian army columns again began to be shot at" by these new recruits in their mountain fastnesses.

"Similar movement within regional elites," Sukhov continues, can be observed "in other Russian regions," but in the Caucasus they are exacerbated by the "obvious" links between the Moscow-supported elites and the anti-Moscow underground: "In a paradoxical way, local officials are both the main enemy and the main source of financing" of the latter.

South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoita, although close to the Russian siloviki, "just like certain of his colleagues over the mountains could not but be concerned by the possible change of his lobby ties in Moscow" following the changeover in the Kremlin, something that may have been behind his stirring of the pot in order to save his own skin.

And both because of what the events in Georgia say about Russia and because of the refugee flows that Russian military action there have provoked, many places in the North, particularly North Ossetia, Ingushetia and Dagestan will be destabilized both ideologically and practically.

Finally, Sukhov notes, "the reports about the formation of volunteer units in Dagestan and Makhachkala testify about two things (among which is no fraternal feeling to the people of Ossetia. First, local politicians are remaining the Kremlin about themselves and second, the North Caucasus remains a place where significant groups of armed people can assemble and move about - without any clarity as to whom they are subordinate."

"It is difficult to imagine that someone in Russia or beyond its borders can be cheered by this reality."

Two other articles today not only provide evidentiary support for all of Sukhov's contentions but also offer additional reasons for thinking that the events in Georgia represent a lighted match that is going to land in the increasingly combustible social and political situations in the republics of the North Caucasus.

In the one, Abdulla Istamulov, the head of the SK-Strategy Analytic Center, argues that the driving force of the opposition to Russian control no longer consists of traditional ethnic groups but rather ideologically defined bands, making it easier for developments in one republic to jump to another ([www.expert.ru/printissues/expert/2008/31/interview\\_banda\\_silnee\\_roda/](http://www.expert.ru/printissues/expert/2008/31/interview_banda_silnee_roda/)).

And in the other, Igor Boykov points out that Russian officials have now acknowledged that they and the government they thought they controlled in Makhachkala is "losing the ideological war to the underground bands of Wahhabis" in Daghestan, thus threatening Russian control there as well ([www.nazlobu.ru/publications/article2906.htm](http://www.nazlobu.ru/publications/article2906.htm)).

How Well Have Russian Forces Performed in Georgia?

August 11, 2008

Given the enormous imbalance in numbers and arms of Russian and Georgian forces, the advance of the former in South Ossetia and beyond surprised no one. But Russian experts are already debating how well Russian forces performed given the nature of their tasks, which so far have been limited, and the quality of their opponent, which they do not rate highly.

In an interview posted on the Kreml.org website yesterday, Anatoly Tsyganok, a retired officer who heads the center for military forecasting at the Moscow Institute of Political and Military Analysis, argued that Russian forces had performed impressively quickly and extraordinarily well ([www.kreml.org/interview/188852218](http://www.kreml.org/interview/188852218)).

But in an article carried on the anti-Kremlin website Forum.msk.ru, Maksim Kalashnikov, who writes frequently on military affairs, suggests that the Russian military's performance in this first war between former Soviet republics and in the first Russian conflict with a regular army since 1969 was not impressive ([forum.msk.ru/material/power/512073.html](http://forum.msk.ru/material/power/512073.html)).

For his part, Tsyganok points to three things to justify his conclusion that the Russian military prepared well. First, he says, the Georgians had a good plan, one based on Pentagon plans for operations in Serbia in the 1990s, and thus presented a challenge to Russian forces out of proportion to their numbers.

Second, he notes, the Russian military responded quickly. "No one expected that Russia would so quickly become involved in an armed conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia and thereby undercut Georgian plans for a lightning-fast war." But political Moscow made the decision and the Russian military responded incredibly fast.

The reason? Georgian actions constituted "a moment of truth for Moscow," one in which the authorities had to choose between the problems military action would create for Russia around the world and "the physical liquidation" of South Ossetia, something that would be from Moscow's point of view "still worse."

And third, again despite expectations in Tbilisi and elsewhere, Russian forces in the Northern Caucasus were ready to move. They left their bases less than five hours after the order was given, their training meant that they did not suffer the kind of losses many in Georgia had thought they would, and they achieved their objectives promptly.

One of the reasons for this success, Tsyganok says, is that the 58<sup>th</sup> Army had just completed a few days earlier the Caucasus 2008 exercises and thus was ready to take the field especially against an opponent like the Georgian military so much smaller and more poorly equipped than itself.

There are more than 100,000 Russian troops in the North Caucasus military district, with some 620 tanks, 200 armored personal carriers, and 875 pieces of artillery. While not all of the men or materiel were available for the operation in Georgia, he notes, enough were to overwhelm the 35,000-man Georgian army with its 160 tanks.

Indeed, one measure of just how pressed Georgian forces immediately and unexpectedly became was a decision by Tbilisi to withdraw its 2,000-man contingent from the American-led forces in Iraq, a withdrawal that Tsyganok implies won't matter all that much on the ground but is symbolically important. (For a map of these forces, see [shurigin.livejournal.com/153936.html](http://shurigin.livejournal.com/153936.html).)

Kalashnikov does not so much challenge the points Tsyganok makes as advances other considerations that he believes suggest that the Russian military's performance in Georgia, while victorious so far, is far from the level that Moscow propagandists and many observers have been claiming.

According to Kalashnikov, Moscow has had six years to prepare for a response to or an intervention against Georgia but did "practically nothing" to get ready for either eventuality. Nowhere is that failure more obvious, he says, than in the failure of Russian forces to use air power to knock out key Georgian institutions and especially Georgian artillery.

The Russian forces did not fly a sufficient number of sorties to do either, he continues, and they lacked the pilotless drones that could have allowed Russian artillery to attack Georgian targets more effectively. And that meant that Russian forces suffered more delay and losses from Georgian artillery than was necessary.

Instead of relying on airport to deal a knockout blow to the enemy, Kalashnikov says, Russian commanders relied on the notion that if Moscow introduces tanks in sufficient number, the opposition will simply "raise its hands" in surrender - even though that "did not work in Afghanistan in the 1980s or in Chechnya in 1995."

As a result, he argues, there is a very real danger that the war between Russia and Georgia will drag on, with the possibility that the United States will resupply Georgia or provide it with various kinds of technologies that Russian forces are not currently capable of neutralizing except at the cost of far greater losses than they have suffered up to now.

-----  
Paul Goble is director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. Earlier, he served as vice dean for the social sciences and humanities at Audentes University in Tallinn and a senior research associate at the EuroCollege of the University of Tartu in Estonia. While there, he launched the "Window on Eurasia" series. Prior to joining the faculty there in 2004, he served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space. Trained at Miami University in Ohio and the University of Chicago, he has been decorated by the governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for his work in promoting Baltic independence and the withdrawal of Russian forces from those formerly

occupied lands.

---