
The New Map Of Georgia

By Ben Judah

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Moscow redraws the map of Georgia, recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as the dust settles and it becomes clearer where power lies on Europe's borderlands, Ben Judah writes for ISN Security Watch.

Hours before the Russians pulled their forces out of the strategic Georgian town of Gori, self-declared commandant General Vlachyslav Borisov stopped his vehicle and gruffly threw open the door to speak to journalists. Sweating and smelling faintly of cognac, he barked: "I'm out of here. I'm withdrawing my combat forces from the area. But peacekeepers are staying." Then he slammed the door.

Russian officials accidentally dropped another hint to their intentions. ISN Security Watch managed to see a roughly drawn ink diagram left behind after a meeting of Russian and Georgian officials on 21 August. This is the new map of Georgia.

The map showed two circles emanating from the center of both the Ossetian and Abkhaz enclaves that reached out to touch the Georgian cities of Gori and Senaki. These are the buffer zones where Borisov plans to leave his troops. However, the future of these territories is still uncertain.

Inside Enclavia Just outside the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali, the peacekeeping barracks that once hosted a 500-strong Russian contingent is a burned-out wreck. The Kremlin's spokesman and one of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's chief aides, Alexander Machevsky, accompanies a tightly controlled press tour through the enclave to inspect the damage.

Standing in front of the rubble, pointing through the smashed walls of the base to the dozens of scorched bare metal bed frames, Machevsky makes his point clear. "There can be no return to the status quo ante."

He trudges over a floor littered with bullet casings from AK-74s, pieces of burned clothing and the shredded personal belongings of the soldiers, stressing the brutality of the Georgian attack. Unnoticed by their superiors, a few troops are sitting around drinking heavily in the evening gloom. None look happy.

In Tskhinvali, the de facto South Ossetian president bellows to the crowds from a podium on Stalin Street: "The Caucasus is a Russian region. It has always been that way. We are not going to let adventurers like [Georgian President Mikheil] Saakashvili or [US Secretary of State Condoleezza] Rice change that. We are going to be an independent state within Russia. It's logical."

The poorly dressed and glum looking huddle drifts away, perhaps contemplating the implications of that speech. The Kremlin's flag flies from government buildings and paramilitaries wear little ribbons of Russian and Ossetian colors.

Russia is clearly in control - but for the moment this is nothing like a permanent settlement.

On 26 August, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced he had recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent nations. It is highly unlikely they will return to Georgian control.

In Tbilisi, Ketil Tsikheleshvili of the think tank European Stability Initiative (ESI) advances a more nuanced view of how the situation might play itself out.

"There are several possible outcomes considering these territories. The first is that the Europeans have been dropping hints about the possible internationalization of the conflict. This would involve the stationing of observers and maybe peacekeepers in Ossetia and Abkhazia and their futures being brought under intense discussion," she tells ISN Security Watch.

However, the ESI believes such an outcome to be unlikely.

"The EU and the US remain committed to Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The most likely outcome I can imagine will be the North Cyprus situation. The world will recognize Georgia's territorial integrity, while Russia and maybe a few of its satellite states will acknowledge South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent," Tsikheleshvili says.

She continues: "The South Ossetians already can see what an example of Russian rule in the Caucasus is like if they look to North Ossetia. How many schools there teach in Ossetian? The answer is none. In a few years the concern of cultural autonomy will mount and they will begin to realize the trap they are in."

Crushed rose This is not how Georgians hoped the "Rose Revolution" would turn out.

In 2003, a wave of nationalism and a desire for western living standards and true democracy swept Saakashvili to power. Young and intensely charismatic, he led his country on an adventure that has turned sour.

"The president turned this country from a sort of post-Soviet ruin into a modern country," a senior western Europe diplomat tells ISN Security Watch, gesturing at perhaps the rather unrepresentative setting of the ornate restaurant in the Tbilisi Marriott hotel to prove his point.

"However, Saakashvili's definitely in until September. Then I can't say. There will be serious questions asked about what has happened and those questions will have consequences."

The Russian invasion has put a stop to those "rose" aspirations for now, and Georgia is reckoning with defeat. Tbilisi may not look miserable on the surface, but you only have to venture into one of the public buildings being used to house over 60,000 displaced people, or drive for under an hour to some of the burned-out villages to find misery waiting for you.

Reconstruction will take years. Georgia's transport infrastructure has been badly damaged, communities in the conflict zone have been hit hard, national parks have reportedly been set alight, commercial shipping has taken a massive blow, the economy has been shaken, but above all, Georgia's diplomatic and military position has been smashed. The armed forces that Saakashvili painstakingly built up though clever arms deals with Israel, the US and former communist states simply no longer exists.

Diplomatically, Georgia is in a disastrous position. Seen as unreliable and even a liability by many EU member-states and now most likely shorn of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for good, Georgia is reaping the consequences of its failed attempt to join the West.

Nona Varanadze, a retired professor and opposition supporter, blames Saakashvili for what has happened.

"Under Shevernadze, we practiced a political balancing act between Russia and the West. Just look at where we are on a map. When the balance got upset, we angered a neighbor and it destroyed so much of the good development that was going on. We could have avoided this and just got rich."

The ESI's Tsikhelashvili stresses that "though my political and cultural values are completely western. I am starting to think that Georgia put all of its eggs in one basket."

In many ways the EU and the US should hold themselves responsible for Georgia's current predicament. Having ostensibly supported a country's bid to remove itself from what Russia considers its exclusive sphere of influence, they failed to give Georgia the necessary security guarantees to make such a transition possible. With Russian forces stationed inside their territory, where EU flags still fly hopelessly from most major buildings, the promise of the West is starting to sound like a deadly siren to many Georgians.

The new order The recent conflict has achieved a primary Russian objective, in proving that American power cannot be solidified along borderlands. This leaves only two powers that can actually integrate or control these territories - the EU or Russia.

The post-Soviet space can either seek to emulate the Baltic republics and find security inside the Union or embrace and hope to benefit from Russian dominance, as have Armenia and Belarus. Both are asymmetrical in how they wield influence.

Russia's strength lies in the areas of hard power such as its military capacities, energy power, cyberwarriors, pro-Russian parties and ethnic minorities or former KGB networks. However, it lacks the powers of persuasion.

Bulgarian expert Ivan Krastev argues in a recent article that "Russia is a born-again 19th-century power that acts in the post-20th-century world where arguments of force and capacity cannot any longer be the only way to define the status or conduct of great powers. The absence of 'soft power' is particularly dangerous for a would-be revisionist state. For if a state wants today to remake the world order, it must be able both to rely on the existing and emerging constellation of powers and be able to capture the international public's imagination."

The EU has the opposite strengths. Its power is soft and lies in the promise of membership, cultural appeal, diplomatic influence and financial clout. However, just as the Kremlin's failure to convince the world its actions are legitimate should force a re-think in its inner circles about a return to great-power status, the EU needs to learn that it does not exist in a vacuum.

Russia's strategy may be 19th century - but Europe is stuck in the future.

The great source of instability for the borderlands is that neither the EU nor Russia have reached their final destinations. Both are lost in transition.

The EU is caught between a disunited vague confederacy and a near-federation capable of speaking with a single voice in foreign policy and acting purposefully in a single direction. Its foreign policy mechanisms may slip into irrelevance and its own stability is far from assured. The news from Brussels is still frustration and malaise following on the heels of the French and Dutch "No" votes in 2005. The Irish "No" vote earlier this year does not bode well.

Russia itself is in a similar unsettled position. Its own territory is too large to be run in a conventional democratic manner and the state is still too weak to dominate its neighbors successfully. In the long run, further disintegration cannot be ruled out and the Kremlin is well aware of this.

Hovering between a post-modern empire and joining the club of post-imperial European great powers alongside the UK, France and Germany, Russia will continue its struggle to find institutional stability at home and a place in the state system - to the great detriment of both its citizens and surrounding countries.

Trapped between two uncertain creatures the post-Soviet states need to learn from the Georgian experience and tread carefully to avoid its fate.

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