
Georgia's Dream Is Shattered, But It Only Has Itself To Blame

By Christopher Langton
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It happened finally. Mikheil Saakashvili's government in Georgia decided to try and retake the separatist province of South Ossetia by force. This was a massive miscalculation by Georgia. Russia was looking for an excuse to stamp its authority on the South Caucasus having become increasingly angered by the imminent Nato membership of Georgia as well as growing western interest in the region. Russia claims that it acted in response to the Georgian assault on the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, in order to protect its citizens in the separatist region.

These citizens, who are actually Georgian nationals although ethnically Ossetian, gained Russian citizenship when Moscow issued passports to many of them whilst cynically upholding the notion of the territorial integrity of Georgia. The issuing of Russian passports to citizens of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the other separatist region, is at odds with the principle of "territorial integrity" and indicates the true Russian intention - to maintain a physical presence in the South Caucasus. Moscow wants a bastion against Nato, but also acted out of a machoistic sense of regaining pride lost when the Soviet Union collapsed and former territories became independent.

None of the actors in this drama can claim to be right. Georgia acted disproportionately and unnecessarily and is now worse off than it was before, with a large number of internally displaced people to add to those from previous conflicts. Its aspirations towards Nato membership and a closer relationship with Europe are in doubt. (Despite its criticism of Russia's role in the crisis, Nato members are likely to view the irresponsible and ill-considered actions of Tbilisi with dismay). Russia invaded the territory of a sovereign state and used disproportionate and sometimes indiscriminate force - particularly air power.

The US, which has the most influence over Saakashvili, could have at least restrained Tbilisi's actions. Europe, too, has influence but failed to use it. The West stood and watched as Tbilisi ratcheted up its military activity and rhetoric, but failed to prevent the crisis. Now it is the western partners of Georgia who most probably will be called upon to rebuild the country once Russia has finished its punitive actions.

Abkhaz and Russian forces are completing the tearing up of the 1994 Moscow Agreement which governs the peace process in Abkhazia by removing Georgian forces from the Kodori Valley in Georgia's Svanetian region. This will effectively re-establish Abkhazia as it was before the break up of the Soviet Union.

Through its actions in South Ossetia, Georgia has lost any moral position it had in relation to its two separatist regions; the painstaking peace processes that started between 1992 and 1994 are in tatters. In both regions there is a growing sense that their future lies with or within Russia and not with Georgia and her partners.

The presence of 3,000 Russian troops in Abkhazia underwrites the security of that territory and may lead the Abkhaz leadership to request the withdrawal of the UN Observer Mission (UNOMIG). And the Russian troops from the 58th

Army who are now ensconced in South Ossetia are likely to stay for the foreseeable future - as will the Russian military contingent in Abkhazia.

What happens next? For Georgia the dream that followed the 2003 Rose Revolution of a united country within the western community has been shattered. By any normal calculation, President Saakashvili's unpredictable and emotional behaviour, which has damaged his country irreparably, would lead to his removal. However, for the moment at least it appears that the Georgian people support him as he vows to continue the struggle against Russian domination.

For Russia there is an extension of influence into the energy corridor of the West and an iron grip on the South Caucasus. Paradoxically, the Russian war in Georgia is likely to have had the effect of reducing the likelihood of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. It will have also secured the region for the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014, by removing any destabilising threat.

There will have to be a re-appraisal of Moscow's relationship with Washington and Europe, of course. The architect of the Russian action was former President Vladimir Putin, who has long wanted to be seen as the strongman underwriting Russia's renewed great power status against the US and its partners.

Given the virulent rhetoric of both Medvedev and Saakashvili towards each other it is hard to see how there can possibly be a return to the "status quo ante bellum" and a resumption of the peace processes governing the two conflict zones in Georgia. There will most likely be some kind of talks, possibly brokered by France along the lines put forward by the French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner.

However, having gone so far in achieving long sought after objectives, Moscow is unlikely to continue to uphold the idea of "territorial integrity" enshrined in the 1994 Moscow Agreement. President Saakashvili, for his part, will continue to demand the return of the territories as he has promised to the Georgian people.

With positions entrenched in this way there is likely to be a long-lasting stalemate. Georgia has lost any ability it had to get back South Ossetia and Abkhazia by force. These regions will most likely become more independent - with or without international recognition - and Russian dominance over them will strengthen, with the possibility of South Ossetia uniting with North Ossetia in the Russian Federation.

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