

It's all open again

The Georgian War and Imperial Geopolitics

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1. Introduction

At the end of 2007, the West Berlin *avant garde* band Einstürzende Neubauten brought out a CD called *Alles wieder offen* (*It's all open again*). It included the song 'Nagorny Karabach' ('Nagorno Karabach'),¹ which proved them once again to be far ahead of public opinion: This enclave is claimed by both Azerbaijan and Armenia and has been one of the central trouble spots in the Caucasus for a long time. However, the attack by Georgian troops on the South Ossetian capital and Russian 'peacekeeping' troops has now given the conflicts in the Southern Caucasus a fundamentally new quality. It marks the beginning of a new era. Since 8 August 2008, a Cold War between Russia and the West has been a reality. Everything is up for grabs again.

This time, unlike the conflict between the Warsaw Pact and NATO, it is not primarily an ideological struggle. The lines of conflict are mainly defined in geopolitical and geostrategic terms. In this respect, the imperialist formulation of interests by the West is clearly to the fore. Georgia is being given a key position in the West's silent struggle against Russia. While the USA, Great Britain, Poland, Sweden and the Baltic states are seeking a rapid escalation, a – somewhat – more moderate attitude has been adopted by France, Germany, Italy and Spain on account of their own interests. However, this does not mean the EU as a whole is refusing to play its part in the escalation of the conflicts with Russia. On the contrary, the policies of both the European Union and Germany now display ever more aggressive anti-Russian features and are consequently becoming aligned with the US strategy of preventing Russia's resurgence as a force in power politics by all means. Even if the Russian reaction to the Georgian attack can be viewed critically from the point of view of compliance with international military law, the hardliners who want to make the confrontational policy towards Moscow even tougher must not be allowed to carry on gaining the upper hand. For this would only achieve one thing: the New Cold War that is constantly being invoked would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

2. Georgia: a geopolitical prize

More than ten years ago, one of the most important US strategists, Jimmy Carter's former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, vividly described the imperatives of imperial geopolitics. He argued that the USA's position of supremacy had to be preserved under all circumstances. To this end, he believed it was necessary for NATO to expand as the USA's 'bridgehead' in Eurasia and for a resurgence of Russia in terms of power politics to be prevented at all costs. In turn, this would require geostrategically significant regions to be removed from the clutches of Moscow – including in particular the Southern Caucasus on Russia's southern flank, in other words Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.² Brzezinski is now a foreign policy adviser to the Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama and caused a stir during the Georgian war by comparing Putin to Hitler.³

A look at the map is enough to identify why the Southern Caucasus is so important. Georgia offers the only possible way of getting gas and oil from the commodity-rich Central Asian

area and transporting goods to Europe from China and Kazakhstan by land. The Nabucco pipeline project is intended to help reduce Europe's 'dependence' on Russian gas imports, which currently make up 40% of its supplies. According to the European press service euractiv, the USA 'has long been pushing for the construction of oil and natural gas pipelines from the Caspian basin that would bypass Russia, especially via Georgia.'⁴

Just as the International Energy Agency was issuing a warning about the European Union's dependence on energy imports, which is continuing to grow rapidly, the same concern prompted an attempt by the EU Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs to reassure stakeholders that, in spite of the Caucasus conflict, the EU was keeping to its plan for the construction of the Nabucco Pipeline from the EU to Erzurum in Eastern Turkey and so to the connecting pipeline already planned through Georgia to the Caspian region: 'There will be a need for this infrastructure,' said Piebalgs.⁵ Nevertheless, according to comments by Ed Chow from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who was quoted in the *Washington Post*, 'Russia has raised serious doubts in the minds of Western lenders and investors that such a pipeline through Georgia would be safe from attack or beyond control of the Kremlin.'⁶

According to euractiv, the pipeline, through which gas is supposed to reach Europe without being subject to Russian control, now 'appears to be up in the air due to the crisis currently pitting Moscow against Tbilisi.'⁷

Georgia's President, Mikheil Saakashvili, has himself stated that, 'the very fact that Georgia is already home to an oil line, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, designed with the precise aim of circumventing Russia in mind, was a major reason for the Russian assault.'⁸ This suspicion is not so far-fetched. For the commissioning of the BTC pipeline in May 2006, over which Washington and Moscow had struggled hard for almost a decade, was one of the biggest geopolitical successes for the USA's ambitions to roll back Russian influence in the region. It is possible that Russia, which itself has an alternative route available under its control with a pipeline of its own, wanted to permanently destroy Georgia's reliability as a future transit country for Caspian energy carriers. According to media reports, the Georgian side sees it this way at least: 'The Georgian security adviser Lomaia says the Russians dropped six bombs on the pipeline, but did not hit it. If this is true, it would be evidence that Russia's military action is also pursuing other, much more far-reaching strategic goals than just the prevention of a humanitarian crisis in South Ossetia.'⁹

However, the BTC pipeline was recently out of operation for three weeks due to an attack carried out on 5 August 2008 west of the city of Erzincan on the upper Euphrates, for which the PKK admitted responsibility (although, having no interest in buyers being frightened off by possible acts of sabotage, the Turkish government spoke of technical difficulties). This interruption in supplies would have made it doubly clear how vulnerable energy transport routes are in the region – even if Russian troops had not advanced as far as Gori and the central Georgian transport axis. The same is also true of the railway line from Kars (eastern Turkey) via Tbilisi to Baku that was completed at the beginning of August 2008. Like the supply



line to the Nabucco route, it runs through an area of Georgia with a majority Armenian population. In the last few years, calls for political autonomy have been growing ever louder in this area.¹⁰ The Kars–Achalkalaki–Tbilisi–Baku (KATB) railway line is supposed to make Georgia the central transit country for the transport of goods from China and Kazakhstan to Europe, providing an option that bypasses the existing Russian and Armenian transport routes. On 24 July 2008, the Turkish section of the railway was opened jointly by the Turkish President Abdullah Gül, Mikheil Saakashvili and the Azerbaijani President Aliyev in a pompous ground-breaking ceremony at Kars.¹¹

In consequence, both the EU Members and the NATO states view Georgia as the geographical area that will be critical if Russia is to be cut off from purchasers for its energy exports. With its three pipeline projects, Nord Stream (the pipeline through the Baltic), South Stream (the Russian-Italian gas pipeline through the Black Sea via Varna in Bulgaria) and Blue Stream (from Russia through the Black Sea to Turkey), Russia is attempting to counter this possibility by using direct energy pipelines to Western and Southern Europe to ensure it is able to export energy undisturbed without being subject to the control of the extremely US-friendly former Eastern Bloc states. This is why the USA, in particular, has been betting on the Georgian card.¹² The goal has been and is to contain Russia's political influence in Europe and prevent Russia from rising to become an industrial power.

Accordingly, for its part, Russia used the opportunity opened up by the Georgian attack to improve its position in the Caucasus. It is hard to imagine that Moscow had not been informed about the Georgian plans to invade. They had evidently prepared well for such an eventuality. In July, 8,000 Russian soldiers carried out an exercise that simulated repulsing a Georgian attack.¹³ This could also explain why the Georgian

troops were halted within 24 hours and the Russian troops won the upper hand relatively easily. It is therefore not very convincing to describe Georgia's war of aggression as if the Georgian President Saakashvili had stumbled into a Russian trap. There is no way of denying the fact that Georgia conducted a war of aggression, even if Russia's good preparations are taken into account.

For the first time since the end of the (old) Cold War, Russia has taken military action to block a Western attempt at expansion – this alone reveals the full impact of the most recent events in the Caucasus.¹⁴ At the same time, the invasion of Georgia is a clear signal to the West that Russia will have to be reckoned with in future in the power poker of international politics. According to an analysis by the think tank Strategic Forecasting, which is sometimes described as the 'shadow CIA', 'the operation in South Ossetia showed that, firstly, Russia proved to have an armed force capable of conducting successful operations, which is something many Western observers doubted before. Secondly, the Russians demonstrated that they can defeat forces trained by American advisors. Thirdly, Russia demonstrated that the US and NATO do not happen to be in a position where they can interfere in a conflict from the military point of view.'¹⁵

It therefore comes as little surprise that Washington has not stinted with criticism of Moscow's invasion and has placed itself almost unreservedly at Georgia's side: 'Russia has invaded a sovereign neighboring state and threatens a democratic government elected by its people,' emphasised US President George Bush, 'Such an action is unacceptable in the 21st century.'¹⁶ This seems very peculiar indeed. What if Cuba had killed US soldiers in a war of aggression against the US base at Guantanamo and reduced Guantanamo to rubble and ashes? We cannot say of whether the US Army would have attempted to create a strategic situation on the ground that would put any

repetition of such an attack out of the question over the long term. It has therefore been one of the principle The fact that the criticism of the Russian reaction to Georgian aggression in the West has not even mentioned the cause of the crisis - the Georgian attack that preceded it - is one of the first war lies in this context. This could be observed in the joint resolution of the conservative, social democrat, liberal, right-wing nationalist and green political groups in the European Parliament that was adopted on 3 September. Furthermore, Moscow's actions cannot be understood if the anti-Russian policies of the West are disregarded. This means that Germany and the European Union, in particular, are by no means innocent either when it comes to the escalation that is taking place at the moment.

3. Germany and the European Union: (un)controlled escalation

The establishment of a Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis opposed to Washington's claim to supremacy represents a geopolitical nightmare for US geopoliticians. Soon after the attacks of 11 September, the former Russian President Vladimir Putin more or less openly offered a cooperative relationship of this kind in a speech to the German Bundestag.¹⁷ Before Putin's speech, Brzezinski was already warning unmistakably against such an alliance: 'We should also remember Putin's call to Germany to join with Russia in creating a European world power that was to be independent of the United States.'¹⁸ Once the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis was threatening to consolidate, in particular in the run up to the US war of aggression against Iraq, Washington did everything it could to drive a wedge between Brussels and Moscow. When doing so, it was able to rely on the anti-Russian actors within the EU, above all Great Britain, Poland, Sweden and the Baltic states. In this way, it proved possible to gradually push the European Union in the direction of ever greater hostility towards Russia.¹⁹

Consequently, the EU's political approach to the current war in the Caucasus has also been characterised by a striking level of bias. The most recent decisions at the European level are abundantly clear in this respect, starting with the one-sided partisanship in favour of Georgia. 'The European Council is gravely concerned by the open conflict which has broken out in Georgia, by the resulting violence and by the disproportionate reaction of Russia.'²⁰ These were the words with which the European heads of state and government commented on 1 September on Georgia's attack on South Ossetia and the Russian peacekeeping troops on the ground, without mentioning, let alone criticising, who started this aggression. As the declaration goes on, Russia alone is put in the pillory. For instance, the heads of state and government strongly condemn 'Russia's unilateral decisions to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.' Quite in contrast to the policy of recognising Kosovo that was pursued by the great majority of EU Member States, it is recalled that, 'a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflict in Georgia must be based on full respect for the principles of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity recognised by international law, the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and United Nations Security Council resolutions.' Furthermore,

Russia is threatened with the suspension of negotiations about a partnership agreement, should it not withdraw its troops to the positions agreed in the six-point plan by the time of the EU-Russia summit on 14 November.

By contrast, Georgia has received unconditional promises that it will receive aid for reconstruction, visa restrictions will be eased and consideration will be given to the 'establishment of a full and comprehensive free trade area'.²¹

Furthermore, the EU is planning to have a military presence in Georgia in future. A so-called fact-finding mission has been dispatched and is supposed to prepare a mission under the umbrella of the European Security and Defence Policy. An agreement with Russia and Georgia now provides for 232 unarmed EU observers to be sent to Georgia. However, contrary to the agreement, the EU is planning not just to station these observers in the buffer zones, but in Abkhazia and South Ossetia themselves. This is to be defined as the objective of the deployment at the EU summit on 15 October. It would represent another serious breach of treaties with Russia on the EU's part. In addition to this, the dispatch of EU observers as envisaged would further weaken the OSCE on the ground and, what is more, the EU can by no means be viewed as an uninterested actor, in part on account of the antecedents of the war. Last but not least, it will not be possible to obtain a UN mandate for the deployment of EU observers to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The declaration adopted by the European Council makes it clear that the EU understands the conflict in the context of its geopolitical rivalry with Russia. The declaration says, 'it is more necessary than ever' for the EU to 'step up its relations with its eastern neighbours,' in which connection explicit mentions are made of Ukraine and the EU-Ukraine summit on 9 September. Furthermore, it is stated that 'Recent events' have illustrated 'the need for Europe to intensify its efforts with regard to the security of energy supplies.' The European heads of state and government have therefore invited 'the Council, in cooperation with the Commission, to examine initiatives to be taken to this end, in particular as regards diversification of energy sources and supply routes.'²²

Demands, some of them vehement, for even more drastic action against Russia have been made on various occasions. For instance, the Chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski (EPP), has pleaded for the EU's position to be 'tougher than NATO's'.²³ If the hardliners have not been able to have their way completely, it has been due to the specific constellation of interests that have made this appear inopportune, above all from a German perspective. Although, on the one hand, Germany may want to show Moscow who sets the tone or who is the boss in the European House, on the other, it would also prefer not to totally ruin its relations with Russia because the business opportunities there are too profitable.

For Russia, which has risen to become the eleventh largest economic power in the world with annual economic growth of 8.7% in 2007, will be reliant on the Western European industrialised states and to a particular degree on Germany as it seeks to push through its planned policy of reindustrialisation. The rapid increase in German trade with Russia is therefore viewed with increasing concern on the other side of



Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili

the Atlantic. For instance, just in the first six months of 2008 German-Russian trade in goods rose by 23%, with Russian energy deliveries going in one direction and German industrial products and installations being exported in the other. If the rates of increase remain steady, Germany's exports to Russia could soon overtake its exports to the USA. The value of Germany's imports from Russia and the USA could be roughly equivalent as soon as next year. Imports from Russia to Germany rose by 29.9% in the first quarter of 2008 to 8.4 billion euros, while imports from the USA fell by 5.2% to 10.9 billion euros.²⁴

German direct investment in Russia is currently running at about 15 billion euros a year. It is therefore not surprising that the German business community welcomed the announcement made by the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in his speech to the German Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations in Berlin on 5 June 2008 concerning his desire to reduce 'Russia's dependence on oil and gas exports' and 'make Russia one of the top five largest economies by 2020.' In order to achieve this, 'major investments' are 'planned in innovative industries, in research and education and in the construction of modern infrastructure.'²⁵ The Chairman of the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations, Klaus Mangold, also used this occasion to propose a 'close partnership for the modernisation and diversification of the Russian economy'. He appears to be convinced that 'Germany and Russia are natural partners.'²⁶

This explains why Germany would not like to see an all-out escalation of the conflict with Moscow. However, given that it simultaneously wishes to extend its own sphere of influence in the Caspian region at Russia's expense, it is nevertheless positioning oneself firmly at the side of Georgia, which it has been helping to arm for a long time – a dangerous game with considerable potential for escalation.

4. German and European (military) aid for Georgia

In the struggle for influence in the Caspian region, Georgia has become one of the central pawns on the Euro-Asian geopolitical chessboard. This is why the country's military capabilities have been massively expanded by the USA, as well as other NATO states, since the 'Rose Revolution' of 2003/2004, during which the pro-Western Saakashvili took power. In this respect, the EU has dealt above all with the civil element of the efforts to strengthen Georgia: Despite plenty of news about an increasingly authoritarian regime in Tbilisi and independent reports of electoral manipulations on Saakashvili's part, the EU is supporting Georgia without ifs and buts under what it calls its Neighbourhood Policy. For instance, 120.4 million euros have been allocated from the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument as aid for Georgia during the period from 2004 to 2010 alone, and it is also possible for a large proportion of this sum to be spent on security policy concerns, such as improvements to border management.²⁷ Nevertheless, civil activities have predominated. Georgia has been offered the prospect 'of moving beyond cooperation to a significant degree of integration, including through a stake in the EU's Internal Market and gradual extension of [the] four freedoms to Georgia.' Furthermore, it has been made possible for 'Georgia to participate progressively in key aspects of EU policies and programmes.' In particular, Georgia has been promised 'increased possibilities for closer cooperation in the area of foreign and security policy, including European Security and Defense Policy in particular on the issues of regional stability and crisis management' (*European Neighbourhood Policy: EU/Georgia Action Plan*).²⁸ Furthermore, in order to get round the resistance to Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO, EU officials have been giving greater consideration to the idea of integrating the two

countries into the European Security and Defence Policy on a 'sectoral' basis, which would also imply that, once the Treaty of Lisbon had been ratified, these states would be protected by the provision on mutual assistance it contains (Article 42[7]). If this were to be implemented, it could mean that, in a worst-case scenario, the next crisis that flares up would draw the European Union into a military involvement in the Caspian region. Germany, especially, has sought to pursue ambitions to extend its influence in the Caspian region, maintaining a presence in Georgia since 1994 with Bundeswehr soldiers posted to the UN's UNOMIG mission and doing 'a great deal' to build up the country's military capabilities. On 18 August 2008, for instance, the ARD magazine programme *Monitor* broadcast a report on the use of German assault rifles by Georgian special units during the assault on South Ossetia. The German Federal Government put it on the record that no export license had been issued for the G36 rifles produced by Heckler & Koch. The company declared that, 'Heckler & Koch has no knowledge of how the G36 rifles could have reached Georgia.' It is, however, intriguing in this connection that, according to *Monitor*, on 29 November 2005 the company had applied to the German Federal Economics Ministry for a license to export 230 G36 rifles to Georgia. However, this application had been rejected on 20 January 2006. The company said that, as a consequence of this, there had been no deliveries of rifles to Georgia.²⁹ German-Georgian military relations have been extremely close for years. There is now speculation that another NATO ally could have delivered the weapons to Georgia.³⁰ According to a report from the German Federal Economics Ministry, just one export licence was issued in 2006 – for self-protection systems for VIP helicopters worth more than 3 million euros.³¹

Furthermore, Georgian officers, above all, have been trained by the Bundeswehr. Such as the Georgian lieutenant colonel Dr. Zasa Golodze, who attended the LGAI (International General/Admiral Staff Officer Course) in 2007.³² Over the last few years, the Bundeswehr has seen a practically continuous stream of high-ranking military delegations from Georgia. Training cooperation is so close that, during a visit to the Bundeswehr Infantry School in June 2007, the Georgian brigadier general Samson Kutateladze felt able to express his undisguised hope 'for an intensification of our partnership-based exchange and further support in the training development of the Georgian military forces'.³³ The Bundeswehr also boasted proudly of its participation in Cooperative Archer 2007 (COAR07), a military manoeuvre that was held in Georgia from 9 to 19 July 2007 as part of the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme.³⁴

Anyone who helps to arm up a country in the middle of one of the most conflict-riven regions of the world in this way can certainly not wash their hands in innocence when things go wrong. Apart from this, Angela Merkel's decision shortly before the crisis escalated to underline unmistakably that Georgia could forget about the NATO membership to which it aspired if there were no 'resolution' of its secessionary conflicts was at best highly irresponsible and at worst a clear signal and encouragement for the Georgian side to unleash their war of aggression against South Ossetia: 'Both Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and Fede-

ral Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party of Germany, SPD) feel it is too early for invitations to be extended to Georgia and Ukraine. Above all, the unrest in Georgia in November 2007 and the lack of stability in Ukraine are regarded as proof that these countries are not ready for NATO. Moreover, reference is made to unresolved territorial conflicts in the separatist Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³⁵ Nevertheless, the principle responsibility for the escalation lies not with Germany, but with the USA.

5. US military trainers and equipment

The USA has borne the main burden of the training provided for Georgian soldiers. According to the assessments of US military personnel, however, the war came too early for the Georgian armed forces. They 'were beginning to walk, but by no means were they running,' said the US Captain Jeff Barta, one of about 100 – according to Russian figures as many as 1,000 – American military trainers in Georgia. The soldiers were attested great fighting spirit, but were still not ready to fight a war.³⁶

Officially, the training given to the Georgians is intended to prepare the soldiers for operations in Iraq. Unofficially, however, according to the AP report, it is also intended to 'bring the armed forces of Georgia, a loyal ally of Washington, up to NATO level as an outpost in the Caucasus'.³⁷ The news magazine *Der Spiegel* has revealed that the USA supported Georgia to the tune of 80 million US dollars just in 2006, of which 13 million dollars paid for 'military supplies and services', as well as the training of soldiers. Apart from this, the USA supported Georgia with regular fleet modernisation measures and the supply of helicopters free of charge.³⁸

The considerable extent of the US military aid, with which the Pentagon has sought 'to overhaul Georgia's forces from bottom to top,' is described by the *New York Times* as follows: 'At senior levels, the United States helped rewrite Georgian military doctrine and train its commanders and staff officers. At the squad level, American marines and soldiers trained Georgian soldiers in the fundamentals of battle.'³⁹

As a result, the Georgian armed forces possess a total of five infantry brigades, each numbering about 2,000 men. In addition to this, there are also reserve units that have undergone significantly worse training. Officially, the Georgian government talks of 37,000 soldiers and 100,000 reservists. Since Mikheil Saakashvili took power, Georgia's military spending has increased strongly: 'In 2003, it was still 52 million lari (approximately 24 million US dollars), but tripled in 2006 to 139 million lari (approximately 78 million US dollars). However, the real expenditure has been much higher. For example, every potential recruit to compulsory military service can buy themselves out of the army – four-fifths of the funds flow directly to the ministry.'⁴⁰

6. Western approval for an internationally illegal war of aggression?

There is vigorous cooperation between Georgia and NATO. A joint manoeuvre was conducted as late as July 2008, once again as part of the Partnership for Peace programme, with a total of 1,630 military personnel participating, among them 1,000

Americans and 600 Georgians.⁴¹

In addition to this, the Georgian army has been or is prominently involved in the internationally illegal war in Iraq, as well as in Afghanistan and Kosovo. In 2008, with 2,000 soldiers, the country even provided the third largest contingent of the 'coalition of the willing' in Iraq after the USA and Great Britain. At the NATO summit held in Bucharest in early April 2008, Georgia and Ukraine were rewarded with offers that held out the prospect of their joining NATO, although the final decision on a concrete Membership Action Plan (MAP) was postponed until December 2008. Previously, the final declaration of the NATO summit in Riga in 2006 had included explicit praise for 'Georgia's contribution to international peacekeeping and security operations'. The text also encouraged Georgia to seek a 'peaceful resolution of outstanding conflicts on its territory'. However, after the Georgian army had been repulsed in South Ossetia in August 2008, the US Air Force flew the Georgian units stationed in Iraq back to the home front to help while the fighting was still going on. In view of the massive campaign to build up the country's military undertaken by the USA and its allies, it is highly likely that, even if they did not give the green light, the US side must have been fully aware of the forthcoming attack and maintained silence about it.

At any rate, the Russians are sure that the attack took place with support from Washington. The Russian NATO ambassador Dmitry Rogozin has stated on the record that Saakashvili agreed the attack with his 'backers'. It is clear to whom he was referring.⁴² Vladimir Vasilyev, the chairman of the State Duma Security Committee, summed up the Russian point of view as follows: 'The further the situation unfolds, the more the world will understand that Georgia would never be able to do all this [attack South Ossetia] without America.'⁴³ The Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin also made his opinion all too plain when he commented on the USA's behaviour in an interview with the German TV station ARD: 'This compels me to think that the American leadership knew about the action that had been prepared and, what is more, took part in it [...] in order to be able to organise a small, victorious war. And if it went wrong to force Russia into the role of the enemy so that the electorate could then be united behind one of the presidential candidates. The candidate from the governing party, of course, as only they could have such a resource at their disposal.'⁴⁴

Indeed, it is difficult to believe that the attack took place without the USA being consulted. However, it must in fact have been clear to the US government that the Georgian army would be crushed, which was precisely what did happen. This raises the question of Washington's motives: Did they simply miscalculate in assuming that Russia would quietly accept the Georgian advance? This is also difficult to imagine, but nevertheless possible. The other explanation is that they were primarily interested in stirring up a conflict with Russia in order to tie the European Union into an even more anti-Russian line and that, in this regard, Saakashvili turned up at just the right moment to play the useful idiot, at the expense of the people in the region. It is impossible to clarify this point with any degree of certainty, but the latter variant does seem more plausible.



The South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali after the Georgian attack

7. The Georgian attack and the Russian counter-offensive

Even though the European Parliament, for example, did not mention the Georgian attack once in its shameful resolution of 3 September, it is still an undisputed fact that Georgia launched a military offensive against South Ossetia in the night of 8 August. According to unconfirmed reports, this led to more than 1,400 deaths, above all among civilians. On 8 August, the Georgian army began its attack on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali, which has a population of 40,000 and is therefore about as large as a medium-sized German town. As a result of this offensive by Georgian troops, hardly any buildings were left standing. Tskhinvali was completely destroyed. Whole streets were flattened. Without any prior warning to the civilian population, Georgian troops attempted to conquer the city with heavy weapons. Rocket launchers that can devastate particularly large areas were deployed during this attack. The Georgian Army also fired on Russian UN soldiers. The headquarters of the Russian UN soldiers were completely destroyed. In all, it is claimed that 18 Russian soldiers posted to the UN-mandated peacekeeping force in South Ossetia were killed. According to unconfirmed reports from Human Rights Watch, the Georgian side used cluster bombs.

The attack itself can only be judged a grave breach of international law and, in particular, a severe infringement of international humanitarian law. The responsibility for this is borne solely by the Georgian government and primarily by the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili. Later accounts from the Georgian side, which characterised the attack as a preventative strike designed to deter the Russian troops who had been mobilised from invading, enjoy little credibility. It is also remarkable that the Georgian story of the events of 8 August kept changing during the first week of the war. By contrast, reports from international press agencies based on statements made by US military advisers paint a clear picture of Georgian aggression. For instance, US military trainers recounted that the brigade they were working with was already getting ready to

leave when they arrived for work on the morning of 7 August 2008: 'The soldiers were sitting on their rucksacks and singing while an Orthodox priest spoke blessings. Soon, buses took them to the front. Georgia launched a military offensive to regain control over the breakaway region of South Ossetia.'⁴⁵

The 'fortunes of war' turned against Georgia soon after the offensive had begun. Russian troops hurried to the aid of the South Ossetian population and their own UN units, repelling the Georgian advance. At the same time, Russian military aircraft bombarded positions on Georgia's core territory. There were also armed clashes between the Russian and Georgian navies in the Black Sea. The Georgian Army had to pull back completely out of South Ossetia on 10 August 2008. The Russian Army continued its advance until it was 25 kilometres from Tbilisi. According to unconfirmed reports from Human Rights Watch, the Russians used cluster bombs just as the Georgians had done. Georgian positions in the city of Gori were bombarded. Civilians were also killed in the attacks, although observers have not reported indiscriminate destruction of the kind visited on Tskhinvali. It is ironic that the Western media described Gori as if the city had been completely annihilated, while the European Commission speaks of the need to rebuild a few destroyed buildings there. In the days that followed, Georgian troops were also driven out of the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia. The Russian military extended its operations to the region around the province of Abkhazia and attempted to prevent further supplies arriving via the port at Poti, as well as gaining control over the weapons stored at the most important Georgian military bases.⁴⁶

The war was therefore a complete debacle for Georgia, in addition to which it also cost numerous human lives. According to official Georgian figures, 180 Georgian soldiers and civilians were killed, while AP quotes independent estimates that mention up to 400 missing or dead soldiers. Furthermore, it is reported that various military bases have been destroyed, including Senaki in the west of the country and Vasiani, where the Georgians were taught by US military trainers.

It seems to have been obvious to US military personnel that the offensive had no chance of success: 'From what I've heard, a lot of the 4th Brigade was hit pretty hard,' said Rachel Dejong, a 24-year-old nurse with the US Navy. The Georgian commander who had been jointly responsible for the training with Barta was killed in the fighting. The Georgians did not lack fighting spirit, in the opinion of their US trainers, but the deficiencies in their training were evidently too great.⁴⁷ Another aspect of the Georgian military operation criticised by the US trainers was that old Soviet Kalashnikovs were used rather than modern US M4 assault rifles. The Georgian communications system also collapsed very quickly due to the use of mobile phones, which the Russians were able to listen in to.⁴⁸ This also raises the question of why the offensive was not prevented, but everyone watched while the Georgian army was allowed to rush to its doom.

8. Controversial ceasefire

On 12 August 2008, a ceasefire between Russia and Georgia was finally signed after the French President of the European Council had visited Moscow and Tbilisi. A dispute about the

contents of the treaty broke out almost as soon as it had been signed. To the present day (18 September), only the six main points of the treaty have been published. Immediately after it had been signed, both the Georgian President and the French President Nicolas Sarkozy attempted to amend the agreement unilaterally.

The declaration issued by the European Council states that the parties had subscribed to the following principles: '(1) Not to resort to force; (2) To end hostilities definitively; (3) To provide free access for humanitarian aid; (4) Georgian military forces will have to withdraw to their usual bases; (5) Russian military forces will have to withdraw to the lines held prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Pending an international mechanism, Russian peace-keeping forces will implement additional security measures; (6) Opening of international talks on the security and stability arrangements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.'⁴⁹ Despite the fact the document was signed by both sides, disputes have broken out about the last two aspects, in particular. Point 5 authorises the Russian troops to remain in Georgia until agreement has been reached. Evidently under pressure from the USA, Poland and the Baltic states, President Sarkozy tried to clarify the ceasefire accord unilaterally. On 14 August 2008, he sent the Georgian President his interpretation of point 5 in a letter, which was published by the French two days later. This may not be regarded as a particularly distinguished example of the art of diplomacy. The additional security measures, he wrote to Saakashvili, should only be implemented in the immediate proximity of South Ossetia and, in particular, should only take place within a zone 'of a few kilometres' around South Ossetia. They should not extend to any large urban centres, in particular the city of Gori, or indeed Georgia's east-west road and railway links. Furthermore, these measures should only be carried out in the form of patrols and were to be of a 'provisional' character until agreement had been reached by the OSCE and the UN. He accompanied these explanations with a request that the Georgian President sign up to the ceasefire plan. He stated that the Russian President had assured him Russian troops would then withdraw. Yet, as has already been mentioned, this was a unilateral clarification to which the Russian side had not agreed. Since then, the dispute between Russia and the West has revolved almost entirely around the interpretation of the ceasefire accord.⁵⁰

While the Russian side believes its obligations under the six-point plan have been fulfilled, the EU and NATO are demanding a complete withdrawal subject to the provisos set out in Sarkozy's unilateral clarification. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, among others, pointed out one particularly ironic detail: 'The original text of the agreement is not publicly accessible, it has not even been seen by the foreign ministries of the other EU states.'⁵¹ The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* went on to comment that, 'These agreements were met with surprise at NATO. Diplomats reported that they were not discussed at a special meeting of NATO foreign ministers on Tuesday. It was generally assumed that Russia would have to withdraw to its pre-war positions and, in particular, that it would leave core Georgia. The official declaration issued by the NATO foreign ministers on Tuesday expressly refers to the French peace plan, but is evidently defective. In a footnote, it mentions a letter of 16 August from Sarkozy to Saakashvili, although the only letter



USS McFaul in the Black Sea on its way to Georgia

to have become known is dated 14 August. Apart from this, reference is made to “subsequent correspondence”.⁵² It is clear from this that the interpretation of the ceasefire accord itself is controversial within NATO, and this was why France was called upon to make the necessary clarifications. Later public statements actually went even further and demanded the unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia. The public have been left almost completely in the dark about the military presence conceded to Russia in Georgia. For this is the only way in which Russia could be portrayed as an aggressor that was unwilling to withdraw, probably one of the main goals of the whole procedure in any case.

In the mean time, the dispute about the real content of the ceasefire accord continues to become more complicated. For instance, the French European Council Presidency stated in early September that the origins of the dispute lay in a translation error. According to the French Foreign Minister Bernhard Kouchner, the Russian translation spoke of security ‘for’ South Ossetia and Abkhazia, whereas the French spoke of security ‘in’ South Ossetia and Abkhazia.⁵³ However, this formulation is quite crucial when it comes to the Russian claim to buffer zones around the two areas and the question of when the Russian withdrawal will have been completed. It is hardly possible to believe the experienced French diplomatic service would allow a translation error to creep into the text. There is much to suggest that the French version or translation was only fabricated once the ceasefire had been signed by the Georgian and Russian presidents because the guarantee concerning

the continued presence of Russian troops around South Ossetia and Abkhazia set out in the treaty had been subjected to criticism, above all in the USA. The French diplomats then sought to respond to this criticism by unilaterally modifying the text. It may be noted that this is not particularly likely to strengthen Russia’s confidence in treaties negotiated and signed by the West.

9. Cold War perspective

The goal of the policy pursued by the USA in Georgia is to initiate a new Cold War against Russia. With the expansion of NATO and the stationing of missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic, Russia is to be challenged through a policy of pinpricks. By disrupting economic relations with Western Europe, Washington wants to contain Russia’s influence on world politics and prevent it from rising to become a new industrial power. Should this scenario prove successful – and at the moment everything seems to suggest it will –, it would simultaneously ensure that the USA’s NATO allies in the west of Europe could be bound into a joint strategy of escalation and would have to get even more heavily involved in projects to secure energy supplies by military action. In this respect, Germany is playing a double role at the moment. On the one hand, it is looking to build up economic relations with Russia but, on the other, it is supporting a strategy of tension within the EU and NATO, even if its approach is more cautious than that advocated hitherto by Poland and the Baltic states, in

particular. Another intermediate stage in this geopolitical and geostrategic challenge to Russia was the establishment of a privileged partnership at the EU-Ukraine summit on 9 September 2008. The planned stationing of EU observers throughout Georgia, the German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel's unconditional support for Georgian and Ukrainian NATO membership (despite the Georgian attack on South Ossetia) – something that is rejected by almost 60% of the population in Germany –, the assistance NATO is giving Georgia as it 'rebuilds' its military capabilities and the permanent presence of a NATO war fleet in the Black Sea give reason to fear a further heightening of tension in future. Georgia will continue to occupy a key position. For instance, on his latest visit to Tbilisi, US Vice-President Dick Cheney promised financial aid worth one billion euros. 570 million euros have been committed by the IMF and the EU will contribute to Georgia's stabilisation as an anti-Russian frontline state with a sum of 500 million euros. NATO too has poured new oil onto the fire, deciding on 15 September 2008 to establish a commission that will have the job of deepening relations with Georgia. This commission is intended to coordinate the activities undertaken to help 'rebuild' the country's armed forces.

As if this were not enough, on 3 September 2008, Kurt Volker, the US ambassador to NATO, demanded that NATO put in place a defence plan for the Baltic states.⁵⁴ On 10 September 2008, the US ambassador to Sweden, Michael M Wood, publicly urged the Swedish government to block the German-Russian Baltic Sea pipeline.⁵⁵ Against this background, it is to be assumed that the policy of pinpricks and provocations along Russia's borders will very soon be escalated somewhere else as well. It is now necessary to break the chain of placatory statements with which this is being denied. The anti-war movement will have to adjust to the realities of the new Cold War. The strategy of imperialism pursued by NATO and the EU must be opposed in a calm, collected fashion here and now.

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