

OCTOBER 2008

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How the West Failed Georgia

ALEXANDER COOLEY

Russia's military clash with Georgia in August and President Dmitri Medvedev's subsequent recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have stunned much of the international community. As the West struggles in the conflict's aftermath to formulate a unified response to Moscow, it is worth reflecting on the prior failures of the Euro-Atlantic community. Western indifference to Georgia's frozen conflicts, divergent transatlantic interests in relation to the regime of Mikheil Saakashvili, and ill-crafted policies regarding Kosovo's independence and NATO expansion all contributed to the tragic events of August. Russian troops may have carved up and occupied Georgia, but the West's previous missteps enabled the conflict's escalation.

ROSE-COLORED LENSES

Throughout the 1990s, Georgia was a low priority for the United States and the European Union. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, Georgia was a failing and fragmented state, unable to perform even the most basic administrative functions or curtail the power of warlords who ruled pockets of the country.

US aid and technical assistance to Georgia, designed to promote reform, often were misappropriated as the country stagnated under the rule of President Eduard Shevardnadze. The Clinton administration did successfully negotiate an agreement to construct the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, but US-Georgia ties mattered little in Washington. Interest in the country was renewed only after the September 11, 2001, attacks on America drew attention to the lawless Pankisi Gorge, a site of Chechen rebel activity. In 2002 the United States sent 200 Special Forces to train Georgian troops (at that time with Russian President Vladimir Putin's approval).

The EU, meanwhile, consumed with managing its own enlargement immediately eastward, engaged very little with Tbilisi during the 1990s. Georgia remained well outside Europe's sphere of interest and influence.

The Rose Revolution of November 2003 and the subsequent emergence of the energetic and charismatic President Saakashvili dramatically altered Georgia's relations with the West, though the United States and EU countries differed in their attitudes toward the young Georgian leader's government.

For the administration of George W. Bush, relations between Tbilisi and Washington became very close very quickly. Saakashvili and his insider circle of reformers expressed unequivocal support for the US-led global war on terror and the war in Iraq and publicly proclaimed that they and Americans shared the same "democratic values." The Georgian president made joining NATO his top foreign policy priority and sent troops to Iraq. The energy and style of Georgia's band of reformers took Washington by storm and personal friendships blossomed between members of the governments. Georgia became one of Washington's most supportive allies and invaluable success stories.

At home Saakashvili made great strides in strengthening state capacity, combating corruption, and improving law and order. At the same time, however, democratic backsliding gave rise to renewed international scrutiny and skepticism regarding the regime's sustained commitment to political reform. These worries culminated in November 2007 when tens of thousands of demonstrators rallied against the government in Tbilisi and were brutally dispersed by riot police. The Georgian president declared a 15-day state of emergency during which more than 500 protesters were hospitalized and private television channels were closed. Although US officials privately expressed concern, they continued to strongly support the regime and its NATO candidacy.

EU members viewed Saakashvili's Georgia with more caution. They welcomed Tbilisi's positive actions, but also saw Georgia as having only

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begun a long process of reform. Tellingly, when Brussels in 2006 launched its first five-year EU-Georgia European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan, Georgian officials asked whether they could, instead, implement the plan's programs and goals in three years. While the EU wanted to begin a sustained process of engagement, Tbilisi wanted to lock in its ties to the West as quickly as possible. Even members of Georgia's "New Group of Friends" (the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria)—which openly supported Tbilisi's eventual inclusion in Euro-Atlantic institutions—identified improving Georgia's democracy as the most urgent priority.

European countries were themselves split as to how far to encourage Georgia's integration with the West, especially as relations between Tbilisi and Moscow grew increasingly hostile in the wake of the Western-backed "color revolutions." Some states with extensive commercial and energy ties to Russia, especially Germany and France, were reluctant to antagonize Moscow, while Britain, Sweden, and several of the newer East European EU members offered stronger public support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Others, most notably Spain and Italy, remained skeptical of the pro-US tone and ties of the Saakashvili administration. And throughout the corridors of Brussels, "expansion fatigue" curbed the EU's appetite to engage with Tbilisi beyond the projects contained in the European Neighborhood Policy.

MISSTEPS WITH MOSCOW

The lack of a concerted approach to Georgia's aspirations was harmful. An even bigger mistake, however, was the manner in which the Euro-Atlantic community dealt with Kosovo's independence and the question of Georgia's admission to NATO.

In February 2008, absent a United Nations Security Council resolution, much of the Western community recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia, long a close ally of Russia's. Even though Moscow had warned for months that recognizing this unilateral declaration would set a dangerous international precedent—and had explicitly noted the status of Georgia's frozen conflicts with its own breakaway provinces—the United States and other supportive European states

argued that Kosovo's case was unique. By failing to formulate an affirmative Kosovo precedent (for example, that Kosovo was recognized only after the province had undergone nine years of international administration under a UN mandate), Washington and Brussels allowed Russia to cynically and selectively link the two issues. If the West could recognize Kosovo's independence, why could Russia not recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia's?

Just a few weeks later, at a NATO summit in Bucharest, Atlantic alliance members' inability to reach a clear consensus on granting Membership Action Plans (MAPs) for Georgia and Ukraine further exacerbated regional security tensions. While formally rejecting a MAP for Georgia, owing to Germany and France's reluctance to antagonize Russia, NATO leaders issued a statement saying that Georgia would inevitably be admitted to the alliance. This curious compromise seemed to reverse the very logic of the established NATO accession process, particularly the membership conditionality that had underpinned previous rounds

of expansion. Rather than beginning an accession process through which Tbilisi would have to demonstrate its commitment to fulfilling membership criteria, NATO members instead offered an unspecified promise

without these critical intermediary steps.

The Bucharest decision infuriated Moscow, which had declared its bitter opposition to this latest NATO expansion into countries of "vital national interest." The decision also failed to give Tbilisi the security assurances and the membership pathway that it had sought from the Atlantic alliance.

As a result of the West's seeming indifference to the Kremlin's warnings regarding Kosovo and NATO, Russia soon began to take additional measures to support the de facto governments in the breakaway territories. Moscow already had been pursuing a strategy of "creeping annexation" by providing Russian passports and even social welfare payments to residents of the two provinces. In April 2008, Russia formally established "special ties" to the pro-Russian ministries of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

These actions brought expressions of concern from Washington and the group of European nations friendly to Georgia, but other EU states chose to remain quiet about the escalating cri-

The transatlantic community created a political environment that bred desperation in the Georgian regime and virtually assured the August escalation.

sis. Given the EU's seeming indifference and the United States's unwillingness, despite its clear sympathies, to pledge concrete security assurances, Tbilisi felt it was out of diplomatic options and drew up plans to take matters into its own hands.

On several occasions after the Bucharest summit, US and international officials pressured the Georgian government not to exercise its military options, despite Russian provocations that seemed designed to goad Tbilisi into an armed response. After a week of shelling in South Ossetia in early August, Georgian troops attempted to retake the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali. That is when full-scale war broke out between Russia and Georgia.

AFTER THE DEBACLE

Russia, of course, must bear responsibility for its military actions in Georgia. But the transatlantic community's divergent interests, conflict-

ing priorities, and diplomatic missteps created a political environment that bred desperation in the Georgian regime and virtually assured the August escalation. Despite its close ties to and working relationships with Georgia, or perhaps because of them, the United States was unable to pressure Tbilisi to resist responding to Russian provocations. And for too long Europe regarded developments in Georgia as outside the sphere of its immediate interests, and remained indifferent to the urgency of Tbilisi's position once Russia took steps to unthaw Georgia's frozen conflicts in the spring of 2008.

Now the transatlantic community has no choice: Georgia is an urgent matter of international concern that will require sustained engagement and transatlantic unity. Having indirectly contributed to the Georgian crisis, the West must now initiate a constructive international process that might bring about a lasting solution. ■

The Fate of Georgian Democracy

JULIE A. GEORGE AND CHRISTOPH H. STEFES

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev recently announced that, for the Russian leadership, Mikheil Saakashvili no longer is Georgia's president. "He doesn't exist for us," Medvedev asserted. "He is a political corpse." Certainly, in the wake of Georgia's lost war with Russia over the two breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, questions have arisen about the path Georgian politics will take from here.

How safe is Saakashvili's presidency from domestic opponents, after he took such a colossal risk with the incursion into South Ossetia that helped precipitate Russia's August 2008 invasion? Given both Saakashvili's presumed domestic vulnerability and Russia's explicit interest in his removal, can we expect democracy to survive in Georgia? Or should we anticipate a replay of the

fates of Georgia's first two presidents—the peaceful overthrow of Eduard Shevardnadze in 2003; or, worse, the military coup and civil war that ousted Zviad Gamsakhurdia in 1992?

At the heart of the matter are predictions about whether democratic processes such as elections and adherence to the rule of law will hold sway over more emotional and immediate forms of political opposition. Since the August war, many observers, and not only in Russia, have forecast the downfall of Saakashvili or Georgian democracy or both. The greater likelihood, however, is that not only will democratic institutions survive in the former Soviet republic, but the war with Russia will politically *reinvigorate* Saakashvili's government.

In light of mounting evidence of Russian and South Ossetian atrocities against Georgian civilians, Saakashvili is likely to maintain the image of Georgia as an innocent victim of foreign aggression. Furthermore, assuming that Western postwar assistance keeps pouring in, Saakashvili could reap the political benefits of bringing hope (and new infrastructure) to a shattered country. Most important, the war may have provided a way

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