



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Ten Years since August 2008: Was it Possible to Avoid the War?

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Questions about the August war will remain and every generation will have different answers to them. The Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014 altered the perception of history – many have started to observe the August war through absolutely different lenses. For the generation which experienced the war – as the participant, the victim or a simple observer – the primary question is: was it possible to avoid this war? Perhaps a more accurate formulation of the question would be: was it possible to avert the war and, if so, at what cost?

Three events have been identified as the triggers for the August war: the international recognition of Kosovo on February 17, 2008, the NATO Bucharest summit of April 2-4, 2008 and the July 4, 2007 decision of the International Olympic Committee to hold the Olympic Games in Sochi.

By 2007 and the first half of 2008, the stars were all aligned in favor of Russia. On June 11, 2008, oil prices reached a historic maximum of USD 147 per barrel. A decade of uninterrupted rise in oil and gas prices propelled Russia to become one of the world's most attractive export markets and investment opportunities. Long-term gas supply contracts transformed Gazprom into a major tool of Russian influence on Europe. Public opinion in Western Europe, after the second Iraq war, became drastically anti-American. The year 2008 was the final period of the Bush presidency in the United States which, naturally, considerably reduced his influence on the international arena. Although the era of Schröder in Germany and Chirac in France had ended by this time, relationships with Russia still occupied an immensely important place in the foreign policy of these countries which again materialized during the NATO Bucharest summit.

Putin decided that his time had come. It was time for Russia, which had been “put on its knees” by the collapse of the Soviet Union, to “rise again.” This meant returning Russia to the “elite league” of major states. The United States was to cease being the only superpower. The President of Russia openly spoke about this on February 10, 2007 during his famous Munich speech.

Solely aggressive rhetoric is not capable of uplifting a country to the status of a major power. If one's desire is to create a new international order, the old order must first be demolished. This was precisely Russia's agenda beginning in 2008 as was seen in the invasion of Georgia followed by the attack on Ukraine, intervention in Syria and the outright interference in the elections of leading Western states.

Putin used the recognition of Kosovo (February 17) as a pretext and unambiguously declared that he was not going to “fool around” and that appropriate blueprints had already been prepared. After this Russia, not Georgia, overtly began altering the status quo in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Russia withdrew from the CIS agreement which imposed sanctions on Abkhazia on March 6 and the Russian Duma adopted a declaration on March 21 calling on the Russian government to initiate discussions on the issue of the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On April 3, Putin wrote a letter to the “presidents” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and promised tangible assistance. Georgia's aspiration toward membership of the North Atlantic Alliance was provided as the underpinning reason for such assistance.

However, the irrelevance of NATO quickly became vivid. The Georgian delegation returned empty-handed from the Bucharest summit of April 2-4 although Russian actions proceeded as planned. On April 16, Putin issued a decree and instructed the heads of the Russian regions to establish direct relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On April 20, a Russian fighter jet shot down a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle. On April 29, the Russians demonstratively moved additional military forces – the Novorossiysk and Pskov airborne units - into Abkhazia. On May 31, the Russians, also demonstratively, moved in railway troops and started work on the reconstruction of the Sokhumi-Gali railway, a railway with no other purpose than transporting Russian military heavy equipment. On June 9, in parallel with the visit of the U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, Russian fighter jets blatantly flew into Georgian airspace and on the second day, and for the first time in history, Russian authorities confirmed their flight. Meanwhile, the Kremlin was completely ignoring the Georgian government's peace initiatives.

It is obvious that Russia was doing everything to prepare the military as well as the political ground for the recognition and actual annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was, however, not in a rush in making the final move.

What was the reaction of the West? Georgia's friends acknowledged Russia's intention to actually annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia although they believed that they could do nothing to oppose it. Georgia and Russia were moving towards confrontation. The West was not able to contain Russia and so it tried to avoid conflict by restraining Georgia as much as possible.

There were countless conversations between Georgian officials and their international partners before the war. In no case has any Western nation offered assistance in case of war with Russia. On the contrary, the advice in effect was to accept any new status quo, imposed by Russia in order to avoid an outright war. Incidentally, nearly similar advice was also given to the new Ukrainian government when Russia annexed Crimea.

Meanwhile, Russia continued "chopping off the dog's tail piece by piece." Had Russia wanted to just recognize Abkhazia or South Ossetia, or fully fortify it militarily, it could have done so quickly and easily. But Putin wanted much more. It was demonstrating to the Georgian government its readiness for war even though it was not initiating an open confrontation.

Many, then as well as now, thought that these Russian actions were designed to provoke the Georgian government in order for it to appear as the instigator of the war, something which was effectively achieved due to the impulsive and shortsighted nature of the then Georgian government. In reality, however, this is absolutely false.

Throughout the entire spring and the beginning of the summer of 2008, Putin was demonstrating the readiness of his armed forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well as in the North Caucasus. The Caucasus 2008 military exercises were the final chord to illustrate this. If provoking Georgia into a war was indeed Putin's desire, would his behavior not then

be exactly the opposite? He would do his best to misguide the Georgian government into believing that he was not going to war over Tskhinvali and Sokhumi.

In fact, by the beginning of August, Putin had completely set the stage for the war, including the almost full evacuation of the civilian population from Tskhinvali. Afterwards, he stood aside and left the stage to Kokoiti who openly declared that his aim was the expulsion of the Georgian population from the Big Liakhvi gorge. The South Ossetians opened fire. Precisely, on August 7, separatist artillery opened fire at the Georgian peacekeeping battalion. Georgia was faced with the choice: either begin the evacuation of the Georgian peacekeepers, police and the civilian population or send in reinforcements to the endangered gorge which certainly was tantamount to going to war against Russia. With every statement or action, including military steps, Russia was signaling its complete readiness to engage in a war.

Putin's calculation, it seems, was precisely that Georgia would become unnerved in the face of an obvious catastrophe and retreat. The potential outcome of the Russian-Georgian war was very clear.

However, what would happen if the Georgian government were to abandon the Liakhvi gorge and effectively capitulate to Kokoiti? Big Liakhvi would have been followed by Prone and Little Liakhvi, then Akhlagori and next, Kodori. In the eyes of the Georgian population, not only the betrayer and treasonous government but the entire state would have been discredited because it was unable to protect its land with the government handing over territories to the enemy. The country would have been doomed to be governed not simply by pro-Russian but directly Kremlin-controlled forces which would assume power through elections or a military coup d'état thereby postponing the dream of an independent Georgia for a long time. Russia would get much more than a "new reality in Abkhazia and South Ossetia." Sergei Shamba's recent interview, in which he says that right after the end of the war Moscow offered them the creation of a confederation with South Ossetia (in which a place had to be reserved for the third member), indicates precisely that.

This is why on that tragic evening of August 7, the opening of fire, even in a war where defeat was predetermined, was the only right decision. It might have led to the temporary loss of territories (we should not forget that the majority of these territories were already under Russian control); however, it gave a chance for Georgia to remain an independent state.