

**AN UNEXPECTED WAR ON THE AGENDA – THE 2008 RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN CONFLICT  
AND THE EUROPEAN UNION****VÁRATLAN HÁBORÚ A NAPIRENDEN – A 2008-AS OROSZ-GRÚZ KONFLIKTUS ÉS AZ  
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The 2008 Russian-Georgian war has dramatically changed the political landscape of the South Caucasus. Russia's assertiveness was a warning signal to the countries of the region - which it considers as its "near abroad" - to limit their aspiration for Euro-Atlantic integration. At the same time, it was proved that NATO and EU were unable to prevent a conflict in their immediate neighbourhood in the first place and later they also failed to efficiently deal with the consequences of the war. This paper aims to briefly recall the events of August 2008 and analyse those implications of the war that have influenced Georgia's and Russia's relations with the EU in the last four years.

A 2008-as orosz-grúz háború drámaian megváltoztatta a politikai erőviszonyokat a Dél-Kaukázusban. Oroszország határozott fellépése figyelmeztetésként szolgált a régió országai számára, melyeket „közel külföldje” részeként tart számon, hogy korlátozzák euró-atlanti integrációs törekvéseiket. Ugyanakkor bebizonyosodott az is, hogy a NATO és az EU nem képes megelőzni egy konfliktust a közvetlen szomszédságában, és amikor az bekövetkezik, nem képes hatékonyan megbirkózni a következményeivel. Ez a tanulmány a 2008. augusztusi események rövid felidézését tűzi ki céljául, valamint elemezni kívánja a háború EU-orosz és EU-grúz kapcsolatokra gyakorolt hatását.

**1. PROLOGUE TO A WAR**

In August 2008, as the world was preparing for the Beijing Olympic Games, Russia's first full-scale war was unfolding in the South Caucasus after its occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. The West was caught by surprise when the tanks of the Russian 58<sup>th</sup> Army had rolled through the Roki tunnel towards Tskhinvali, capital of the secessionist Georgian region, South Ossetia and Georgian troops facing the outnumbered and outgunned enemy had started their withdrawal.

But was it a surprise that the hostility between Moscow and Tbilisi erupted in a war in August 2008? Prior to the war, numerous signs pointed to an inevitable armed conflict but the West did not want to face the inconvenient truth. It was easier to ignore the worsening situation and sweep the whole problem under the carpet than to attempt to interfere and prevent the unfolding conflict.

From 1999, Moscow had intentionally built up its military presence in the region and equipped its South Ossetian and Abkhaz allies with heavy weaponry, but in Russia's view the red line was crossed by Tbilisi in 2002, when it made a declaration on its aspiration to NATO membership at the NATO Summit in Prague. [1] Since Moscow has always considered the South Caucasus as a part of its "near abroad" (i.e. special sphere of interest), after Georgia had expressed its wish to join NATO, Russia applied permanent pressure and intimidation on Tbilisi in order to change its course towards real independence and Western integration. The West lacked both political will and means to effectively tackle the problem, thus chose not to interfere.

In 2007, Russia suspended its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) which through its flank limitation circumscribed the Russian military presence in the Caucasus. The suspension of the CFE gave Moscow a free hand in strengthening its military forces in the region. At the same time Moscow failed to comply with its Istanbul Commitments made at the OSCE Summit in 1999 to withdraw its troops from Georgia and Moldova. [2]

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These diplomatic moves and using Kosovo's declaration of independence as a precedent for Abkhazia and South Ossetia paved the way for a military solution in Georgia.

By 2008, Georgian-Russian relations had been severely tense for many years. They were burdened by countless incidents, including bombing Georgian villages and a radar station by Russian fighters (denied by Moscow), as well as a trade embargo on Georgian agricultural products. At the same time, Russian authorities had heavily distributed Russian passports in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, creating a pretext to defend "Russian citizens" in the breakaway regions. The Russian preparation for war was well described by Andrei Illarionov, once Presidential Advisor to Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who wrote that "Russian authorities had been making serious preparations for war over the span of nearly one decade. Indeed, it is remarkable how detailed, precise, coordinated, and secretive was the Russian leadership's planning for the military actions that caught most of the world by surprise in August 2008." [3]

By July 2008 everything was set up for an armed conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The U.S. and a few European countries – most importantly Germany - made an attempt to seek a peaceful settlement through negotiations, but it lacked the necessary political weight to put enough pressure on the involved parties to reach for a peaceful solution.

What happened exactly on the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 and what were the reasons laying beneath the events are still objects of various theories. The 2009 report of the European Union's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG) carefully shares the responsibility between the involved parties. The Report found that "The shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict in Georgia, yet it was only the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, provocations and incidents." [4] At the same time, the Report makes it clear that "any explanation of the origins of the conflict cannot focus solely on the artillery attack on Tskhinvali in the night of 7/8 August and on what then developed into the questionable Georgian offensive in South Ossetia and the Russian military action. The evaluation also has to cover the run-up to the war during the years before and the mounting tensions in the months and weeks immediately preceding the outbreak of hostilities. It must also take into account years of provocations, mutual accusations, military and political threats and acts of violence both inside and outside the conflict zone. It has to consider, too, the impact of a great power's coercive politics and diplomacy against a small and insubordinate neighbour, together with the small neighbour's penchant for overplaying its hand and acting in the heat of the moment without careful consideration of the final outcome, not to mention its fear that it might permanently lose important parts of its territory through creeping annexation." [5]

On the other hand, some respected Western scholars put the lion's share of the responsibility on Moscow in starting the war. [6] According to Ronald D. Asmus of the Brussels-based Transatlantic Center "Saakashvili's final order to go to war was triggered by several factors – the lack of any Ossetian or Russian response to his unilateral ceasefire, the renewed shelling of Georgian villages that evening, and the movement of Russian forces the previous evening, as well as fresh intelligence indicating that additional Russian forces were poised to move through the Roki tunnel after dark. But the final straw was a Georgian reconnaissance unit's visual confirmation of a military column moving from Java toward Tskhinvali. Based on the numbers and type of equipment in the column – tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and artillery –the Georgians concluded that these forces were neither South Ossetian nor North Caucasian "volunteers." It was the Russian army." [7]

Albeit it is still widely debated who started the hostilities, it is doubtless that the Russian army had been in place before the conflict began. All the necessary measures were taken under the pretext of "Kavkaz-2008", a military exercise in the North Caucasus in July and August 2008. Even the Black Sea Fleet was mobilized, which allowed the Russian navy to disembark troops in Abkhazia in the first days of the conflict. These and other careful preparations all signalled that the Russian army had planned the war for long time and had precisely put together every necessary piece of the war

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machine by early August 2008. Furthermore, the – according to NATO standards - poor conditions of the Russian army did not allow to win an unexpected and unprepared war, thus the fast and devastating victory of Russia was an eminent proof of years of planning.

## 2. THE EU'S ROLE IN THE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In August 2008, coincidentally one of the European Union's foreign politically most active country – France – was at the helm of the EU, as it had took the rotating Presidency for the second half of the year in July. French President Nicolas Sarkozy reacted quickly to the events, flew to Moscow and brokered a 6-point ceasefire agreement on behalf of the EU on 12 August. [8] The EU's – and the French Presidency's – fast and as it seemed effective reaction was impressive and interpreted as a huge diplomatic victory, while the U.S. was sidelined.

However, later the ceasefire agreement turned out to be not as coherent as it seemed first. The agreement failed to mention Georgia's territorial integrity and *ad absurdum* gave Russian forces the right to “implement additional security measures” as peacekeepers. It is unprecedented that one of the belligerents obtain right to become a peacekeeper in the very same conflict. More worryingly, Russia has broken the terms of the agreement with impunity. Russian troops have continued to occupy Georgian territories and have not returned to their pre-war positions as it was stipulated in the ceasefire agreement. [9] The incompletion of the agreement by Russia has been met with faint responses from the EU.

The de facto annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was cemented by Moscow, when it recognised the two breakaway regions as independent states on 26 August 2008. Albeit an extraordinary European Council in Brussels on 1 September 2008 strongly condemned Russia's decision to recognise the two would-be states [10] and decided to launch a fact-finding mission and an observer mission, as well as to appoint a European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus, it also included conciliatory tones towards Moscow admitting the interdependence between the EU and Russia.

Perhaps one of the most substantial conflict resolution measures of the EU was the set up of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia on 15 September 2008. The EUMM – although its operation is restricted in South Ossetia and Abkhazia by the local authorities and Russian forces – contributes to the stability on the ground to a great extent and the presence of EU staff in the conflict region has a moderating role in itself.

To summarize the EU's reactions to the sudden eruption of the conflict, the conclusion can be drawn that the Union acted quickly mainly due to the role of the French Presidency and took the leadership in the ceasefire negotiations, albeit the actual outcome of these negotiations were controversial and Russia failed to fully comply with the agreement. Furthermore, the EU introduced some tangible measures of which the launch of the EUMM was the most useful besides the humanitarian and financial aid provided by the EU and its member states.

## 3. IMPLICATIONS OF THE WAR IN EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

The eruption of the war was a shock both to EU institutions and individual member states. EU members have always had divergent relations with Russia, thus their reactions were also slightly different. Some of them (e.g. Germany) blamed the responsibility of starting the war on Georgia while those countries which are historically antagonist to Russia (such as ex-communist Central and Eastern European countries) strongly condemned the Russian aggression. [11]

The EU's Common Security and Foreign Policy is determined mainly by member states – it was even more the case before the Lisbon Treaty entered into force – and not supranational EU institutions, thus it was inevitable to smooth the differences among the states in order to form a unified EU reaction. In view of the fact that Moscow's military adventure raised such grave concerns all over the EU, it was possible to form a common position on 1 September as it was mentioned in the previous chapter, and condemn the Russian aggression.

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One of the retaliatory measures taken by the EU was the suspension of the talks on a new partnership agreement between Russia and the European Union. However, few months after the war, at the November Russia-EU Summit in Nice, the frozen negotiations were resumed, even though several EU countries – especially Lithuania - had opposed the restart of the discussions on the agreement. [12] It was the first sign of the fact that according to some EU states the political and economic relations with Russia are more important than the diplomatic pressure on Moscow to abandon its assertive policy in Georgia and the Caucasus.

Since then, mainly France, Germany and Italy have been in favour of softening the EU's position towards Russia. After four years, it seems as if the war had never happened. In 2010, France, the broker of the ceasefire agreement, made an advantageous deal selling two Mistral class helicopter carriers to Moscow, which makes Russia capable of carrying out amphibious operations in the Black Sea Region. [13] Still in 2010, GDF Suez, a French multinational energy company, made a lucrative deal by acquiring 9% stake in the Nord Stream project, which brings gas to Germany directly from Russia. [14] The financial and economic crisis made the situation even worse, since it has overshadowed the events of August 2008. Tackling grave economic problems, there has been no appetite in the EU to seriously get involved in the affairs of the South Caucasus. Furthermore, the economic weakness has eroded the EU's soft power which it has mainly been relying on in its foreign policy. As a consequence, EU's foreign policy towards the region is largely passive, there is no serious initiative to deal with the challenges raised by the unresolved conflicts of the South Caucasus.

On the other hand, Russian foreign policy continued to push its earlier proposal of reshaping Europe's security architecture immediately after the war. On 8 October 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev drew a picture of a new security cooperation in Europe at the World Policy Conference in Evian, France. In his speech the President cited the Georgian conflict as a proof of the necessity of the adoption of a new security system in Europe. [15]

According to the Russian plans no international organizations or states can have the right to guarantee peace and stability, instead a treaty must guarantee equal security for all. The Russian proposals have practically aimed to create a new security organisation with limited scope to meddle in international conflicts and right for Russia to veto any initiative just like in the UN Security Council or in the OSCE. This new treaty and organisation should substitute NATO in Europe involving Russia in the decision making in every hard security issues in the continent. [16] It is not a surprise that there is no substantial answer from the West for the time being, albeit the leaders of certain countries (e.g. Germany, France, Italy, Greece) expressed their view that it would be expedient to negotiate security issues with Russia in order to improve mutual trust. Later the amended initiative has reappeared again and again in Moscow's official communication.

Aside from the debates of a new security architecture, in the South Caucasus neither NATO nor EU have a coherent strategy for the settlement of the frozen conflicts, which are the main stumbling block in the way of the democratic development and Western integration of the region.

As far as the EU is concerned, it is clearly not able to live up to the principles and goals laid down in the EU's Security Strategy of 2003. The Strategy envisages a role for the EU to become "inevitably a global player" and it "should be ready to share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world." [17] Contrary to the abovementioned goals, EU's role in settling the security challenges of the South Caucasus is marginal - even if the region is a part of its immediate neighbourhood – partly due to the fact that it has limited means to apply in an armed conflict. As it was concluded in a paper not long after the war: "The European Union's response to the Caucasus crisis of mid-August 2008 supplies two indications of its foreign policy weakness. Firstly it showed that the twenty-seven member states have no common position on how the EU should respond to the conflicting parties, especially Russia. Secondly, the crisis revealed the EU's inadequacies in the field of conflict prevention." [18]

The European Union's soft power is proved to be less efficient in solving the frozen conflicts of the region, especially because it is not used with its full potential due to the economic interdependence between European countries and

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Russia, preventing the introduction of serious economic sanctions by the EU. Also, the lack of the incentive of EU membership perspective for the countries of the South Caucasus limits the EU's political influence in these states.

#### 4. IMPLICATIONS OF THE WAR IN EU-GEORGIA RELATIONS

The 2008 war has had severe implications in EU-Georgia relations. Tbilisi, previously a "top student" of the region suddenly became a "bad guy" who waged a war on its secessionist regions. For their part, several EU members felt they were proved to be right not giving membership perspective to the countries of the post-soviet region burdened with unresolved conflicts. Tbilisi's involvement in a hot conflict has caused heavy economic and political damages for the country and a serious setback in its NATO and EU membership bid. [19]

Clearly, the EU has rightly been aware of not allowing countries in the organization which have potential conflicts with their neighbours. Cyprus, which joined the Union in 2004, brought in its unresolved conflict with Northern Cyprus and Turkey and as a consequence NATO-EU relations have been paralysed and EU-Turkey relations have been severely strained.

At the same time, other European countries (e.g. Sweden, Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries) recognised the increasing assertiveness of Russia and called for further assistance to support the democratic development and Western integration of the former European soviet states. As a result of the war, the adoption of the Polish-Swedish Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative gained momentum and it officially became the eastern element of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2009. The EaP provides tangible measures for its Eastern members, including Georgia, in their integration process, such as the adoption of an Association Agreement with the EU (including the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area) and visa free travel.

For its part, Tbilisi was disappointed in the Western response to the Russian aggression. The illusion of the Georgian administration that either the U.S. (NATO) or EU had been able to effectively contain Moscow's assertiveness in the region disappeared after the war. [20] Tbilisi had to reshape its ambitions and form a more realistic approach towards its secessionist regions and Western integration, thus the Eastern Partnership became the primary channel to continue the European integration process together with other participating states.

Besides the adoption of the EaP initiative, the Union also provided financial and humanitarian aid in order to mitigate the consequences of the war and launched the monitoring mission EUMM. Between 1992 and 2006 the EU granted 505 million euro to Georgia from various financial instruments. However, from this sum only 33 million euro supported confidence building and economic rehabilitation in the conflict zones. [21] After the war, a Donor Conference was held in Brussels on 22 October 2008 under the auspices of the European Union. Individual EU members and the European Community pledged to provide 615 million euro until 2010 to assist Georgia's economic recovery. [22]

In addition to the financial assistance, the EU co-chair the Geneva International Discussions on the crisis in Georgia, which is the main platform of the negotiations between the conflicting parties. Furthermore, after the war, the EU appointed an EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus, the Swedish diplomat Peter Semneby, who was later replaced by Philippe Lefort as the EUSR for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia.

After four years and a financial and economic crisis the attention of the EU and individual member countries towards the Georgian unresolved conflict has significantly faded. More effective and tangible measures are needed in order to facilitate the conflict resolution and conduct a genuine and efficient policy which leads Georgia closer to the Union and assists it in its democratization process.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

The roots of the Russo-Georgian war remain intact. There is no sign that the Russian backed, de facto independent breakaway regions of Georgia are in the slightest degree interested in solving their conflict with Georgia. Moscow,



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through its control over Tskhinvali and Sukhumi, has an enormous leverage on Tbilisi. The war has tilted the pre-2008 status quo in Russia's favour. Despite the strong Western condemnation of the disproportional use of military force by Moscow, the position and influence of Western countries and their organisations (i.e. NATO and EU) have significantly weakened since the war, even if some of their policies (e.g. the Eastern Partnership and the launch of the EUMM) can be considered effective.

Regarding the European Union, it does not seem to have a comprehensive scheme to facilitate a peaceful settlement in Georgia, and more generally, in other countries of the South Caucasus suffering from unresolved conflicts. It means that the Union is led by the events in the region and it lacks a strategy to prevent the revival of these conflicts. Therefore it would be essential to elaborate an EU strategy for the South Caucasus, as it was initiated by the 20 May 2010 resolution of the European Parliament. [23] The new strategy should complement for the EU's civilian efforts with a more proactive policy in hard security issues, thus linking its soft power with its potential of practicing leverage in the conflict resolution processes.

Past wars have taught us the lesson that ignoring the fundamental reasons behind a conflict could easily lead to its escalation or repetition. Therefore, despite all financial and economic difficulties and all institutional problems the EU faces, it is of utmost importance not to close our eyes over the challenges of the frozen conflicts of the South Caucasus - including in Georgia - in order to prevent an armed conflict in the future and save the lives of its potential victims.

*Kulcsszavak: Oroszország, Grúzia, Európai Unió, háború*

*Keywords: Russia, Georgia, European Union, war*

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