

GEORGIA AND RUSSIA: CLASHING OVER ABKHAZIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the dispute between Georgia and Russia in a new, dangerously confrontational phase, the risk of war in the South Caucasus is growing. Concerned by NATO's plans for further extension to former Soviet republics and Kosovo's unilateral but Western-orchestrated independence, Russia has stepped up manipulation of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflicts. Georgia remains determined to restore its territorial integrity, and hawks in Tbilisi are seriously considering a military option. Both sides need to recognise the risks in current policies, cool their rhetoric and cease military preparations. Russia should cease undermining its peacekeeper and mediator roles and be open to a change of negotiating formats. Georgia should adopt a new approach to the Abkhaz, encouraging their links to the outside world to lessen dependence on Russia and emphasising incremental confidence building to establish the mutual trust needed for successful negotiations. The U.S. and European Union (EU) should be firm and united in cautioning both Moscow and Tbilisi against military adventures.

Moscow deployed additional troops and military hardware, allegedly in furtherance of its peacekeeping mandate, to Georgia's breakaway territory of Abkhazia in April 2008, thus continuing a pattern of escalating tensions. This includes former President Vladimir Putin's announcement that Russia would formalise ties with Abkhazia and statements by Kremlin officials that Moscow was prepared to use military force to protect its citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia if hostilities resumed. How close to that kind of conflict the region may be is suggested by a series of incidents in which unmanned Georgian aircraft have been shot down over Abkhazia, at least once by a Russian jet.

Tbilisi has responded with a diplomatic offensive, enlisting high-level Western political support, while repeating that it wants to resolve the frozen conflicts peacefully. It shares blame for the escalation, however. It has quietly been making military preparations, particularly in western Georgia and Upper Kodori. A number of powerful advisers and structures around President Mikheil Saakashvili appear increasingly convinced a military operation in Abkhazia is feasible

and necessary. The option they seem to favour would aim at regaining control of the southern part of the territory so as to establish at least a temporary partition. The Georgians have been warned by their Western partners against attempting a military solution. But there are strong feelings in Tbilisi that something must be done to change a status quo in which Russia challenges the country's sovereignty with virtual impunity. The risk of miscalculation by either side leading to unintended fighting is also serious.

The Abkhaz themselves fear that they will be the biggest losers in the Moscow-Tbilisi dispute. Russia has been their sole support as they have sought to break away from Georgian rule, but there is little likelihood Moscow would ever formally recognise their independence. Instead, the Abkhaz find themselves being used for purposes having little to do with their own cause and in danger of being absorbed as a small minority into the giant Russian Federation. That realisation is sinking in and could provide the basis for new, more promising Tbilisi-Sukhumi talks.

The Georgian government says it wants to move in that direction, but there has been too little realism and too many mixed messages in its language to date. President Saakashvili offered a new peace plan for Abkhazia in March, with extensive autonomy, a jointly controlled economic zone and gradual merger of law enforcement and customs agencies. If this initiative is not to be stillborn, however, the Georgians will need to take steps to persuade the Abkhaz that it is not meant primarily to satisfy Western partners, and they are serious about restarting a meaningful negotiating process. This requires an immediate end to bellicose rhetoric, postponement of efforts to settle the ultimate status question and a newly consistent focus on confidence building. While Georgia's desire to change the negotiations format, currently mediated by Russia, is understandable, it should not make this a precondition for resuming talks.

The West must meanwhile use all its influence to press for peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Russian conflicts alike. Persuading

Russia to withdraw any troops and equipment from Abkhazia which do not fit with its peacekeeping mandate from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) would improve the environment for diplomatic progress. The 5-6 June visit of foreign policy chief Javier Solana to Tbilisi and Sukhumi is an opportunity for the EU to show unity and resolve, as well as listen to the sides' grievances. The U.S. and EU should also be unequivocal about the negative impact that a conflict in Abkhazia would have on the 2014 Sochi Olympics. At the same time, they should show they are aware of Russia's legitimate interests in the Caucasus and concerns for the stability of its own southern regions, and should unmistakably communicate to Georgia that any rash moves would have negative consequences for its NATO ambitions as well as foreign investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Georgian, Abkhaz and Russian Sides:

1. Refrain from hostile actions and confrontational rhetoric, while respecting the 1994 Moscow Agreement and relevant UN Security Council Resolutions and CIS decisions regulating the ceasefire regime, separation of forces and deployment of peacekeeping troops in Abkhazia.
2. Resume negotiations, focusing on confidence building first rather than status issues, and agree on changes to the negotiations format that emphasise direct Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue and give the EU a role on a par with Russia and the UN.

To the Georgian Side:

3. Halt any preparations for a military operation as well as belligerent rhetoric (including false press reports), and be transparent with regard to military and internal affairs ministry budgets and acquisitions.
4. Show respect for the Abkhaz self-determination aspirations and security fears, including by issuing a statement regretting past injustices.
5. Pursue and consistently implement without status preconditions measures designed to build confidence over time, such as a free trade zone along both sides of the ceasefire line and steps to allow the Abkhaz to develop ties beyond Russia, including the removal of sanctions and reopening of airport, railroad and seaport links.

6. Keep the Upper Kodori Gorge free of military presence and activity, provide full information on the security presence there and refrain from overflights of Abkhazia, including by unmanned aircraft.
7. Commit formally and without preconditions to non-resumption of hostilities.

To the Georgian and Abkhaz Sides:

8. Sukhumi should carry out more measures to support sustainable returns, and both sides should cease harassment of Gali returnees and agree on a returns verification exercise for the Gali district by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

To the Russian Side:

9. Refrain from all actions that undermine Georgia's sovereignty and Russia's role as an impartial mediator and peacekeeper, including unilateral upgrading of ties with de facto authorities in Abkhazia.
10. Withdraw troops and equipment introduced into Abkhazia on 29 April and 31 May 2008 and ensure that the number, equipment and activities of CIS peacekeepers deployed there is consistent with relevant CIS rules.

To NATO:

11. Make more effective use of the NATO-Russia Council, especially as a forum to discuss NATO enlargement to Georgia and Ukraine, including Russian concerns.

To the EU, U.S. and Wider International Community:

12. Call on all sides to refrain from hostilities and return to negotiations, while emphasising the negative consequences if conflict erupts, including for Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and for Russia's plans to host successful Winter Olympics in 2014.
13. The EU should promptly implement European Commission confidence-building measures, including speeding up the opening of EU information centres in the conflict regions.

Tbilisi/Moscow/Brussels, 5 June 2008

GEORGIA AND RUSSIA: CLASHING OVER ABKHAZIA

I. INTRODUCTION

Georgian-Russian relations have been seriously worsening since 2004, when President Saakashvili adopted a liberal reformist course, a Euro-Atlantic foreign policy orientation and an assertive approach to the protracted Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts.¹ The two countries have competing political projects and visions of the South Caucasus. Viewing Georgia's deepening ties with NATO, the European Union (EU) and the U.S. as a threat to its security, Russia has employed a range of political and economic levers against Georgia, including economic sanctions, visa restrictions and closure of transport links.²

Georgia argues that Russia directly intervenes in its internal affairs by nurturing trouble with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It has criticised Moscow's economic, budgetary and military support to the breakaway republics and has convinced many in the U.S. and the EU that neither Russia's mediation efforts in the conflicts nor its peacekeeping troops are neutral.³ Moscow's heavy-handed policies have in turn reinforced Georgia's desire to join NATO.

Russia restored trade, transport and postal links earlier in 2008, but the pattern of escalating tensions soon hit another low, when Russia substantially increased its involvement in Abkhazia. In March, it withdrew from the 1996 Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) sanctions on Abkhazia, began to legalise links with both of the breakaway regions and was accused by Georgia of downing one of its drone aircraft over Abkhazia, a claim Moscow has denied. In late

April/early May Russia greatly increased the risk that a miscalculation could lead to war by deploying hundreds of additional troops in Abkhazia, armed and trained for combat.⁴

Tbilisi responded by stepping up its efforts to enlist all available Western support and warning that Russia's expansion in the South Caucasus could present dangers for Europe.⁵ It accused Russia of creeping annexation, while emphatically reiterating its own commitment to peaceful resolution of the conflicts. But there are hawks in Tbilisi who believe Georgia cannot be reunited through diplomacy and are considering the war option, including an operation to re-establish control over at least some parts of Abkhazia.

¹ A degree of tension has existed, however, since the end of the Soviet Union.

² Most of these measures were implemented in the last quarter of 2006. For background, see Crisis Group Europe Reports N°189, *Georgia: Sliding towards Authoritarianism?*, 19 December 2007; and N°179, *Abkhazia: Ways Forward*, 18 January 2007.

³ For details, see Crisis Group Report, *Sliding towards Authoritarianism?*, op. cit., pp. 7-12; and Crisis Group Europe Report N°183, *Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly*, 7 June 2007, pp. 17-19.

⁴ Moscow announced its intent on 29 April and on 8 May said it had increased troops in Abkhazia from 1,997 to 2,542, 458 short of the 3,000 limit set by CIS agreements, defence ministry website, www.mil.ru/info/1069/details/index.shtml?id=42520.

⁵ "The President of Georgia Met the Representatives of EU Countries", president's press office, 12 May 2008.

II. THE APRIL ESCALATION

A. THE DIPLOMATIC ROW

The Georgian-Russian relationship hit a new low after Kosovo's declaration of independence on 17 February 2008 and the pledge of NATO's Bucharest summit on 2-4 April that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually be admitted to membership in that alliance. Russia took a series of legal, diplomatic and military steps to increase its support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and openly warned that its assistance "will continue to have not a declarative, but a substantive character".⁶ Georgia interpreted this as meaning that Russia intended to maintain an occupation of part of its national territory.

On 6 March, Moscow cited "changed circumstances" and withdrew from the 1996 CIS pact "On Measures to Regulate the Conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia", which imposed trade, economic, financial and transport sanctions on Abkhazia. The sanctions had long been disregarded by Russia, which has lucrative trade, investment and commercial links with Abkhazia, including the Sochi-Sukhumi railway, whose opening it facilitated in 2004. But their formal lifting was a diplomatic slap in Tbilisi's face and came as Georgia's recently appointed minister for reintegration was beginning to talk about his government's willingness to be more flexible on Abkhazia's contacts with the outer world. Indeed, Russia lifted the sanctions to prevent any incremental progress in Georgian-Abkhaz bilateral contacts. Tbilisi denounced the decision, asserting that its motivation was to facilitate "providing the separatist government with military assistance and establishing its [Russia's] military presence in Abkhazia".⁷

On 13 March, the Russian State Duma held hearings on possible recognition of Abkhazia's, South Os-

setia's and Transdniestria's independence, pursuant to the call by the de facto leaderships of the first two of those regions for this based on what they called the "Kosovo precedent".⁸ On 21 March, the Duma adopted a non-binding resolution urging the government "to intensify efforts aimed at the protection of the security of citizens of the Russian Federation, residing on the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" and consider "the possibility of reinforcement of the [Russian] peacekeeping troops".⁹ The government was also encouraged to open representation offices in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, ease border restrictions, boost economic ties and consider formal recognition if Georgia joined NATO.¹⁰

On 16 April, after NATO's Bucharest meeting, then President Putin issued instructions to the Russian government to strengthen its official links with de facto counterparts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹¹ While Russia has long promoted ties with these regions, this was the first time it had by extension acknowledged the legality of some of their de facto institutions.¹² The government was also tasked to "create mechanisms for the comprehensive defence of the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of Russian citizens living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia".¹³ On 21 April, Presidents Saakashvili and Putin spoke by phone, and Saakashvili demanded that Russia rescind the decision on official links. A Georgian official said Putin refused boorishly, and the tone of the conversation was extremely hostile.¹⁴ Several sources told Crisis Group that thereafter all official Russian-Georgian

⁶ "On the Reply of the President of Russia Vladimir Putin to the Messages of President of Abkhazia Sergey Bagapsh and President of South Ossetia Eduard Kokoity", foreign ministry press release, Moscow, 3 April 2008.

⁷ "This step can be assessed in no other terms but as an overt attempt to infringe Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and an extremely dangerous provocation aimed at abetting separatism and escalating tension in the conflict zone", Georgian foreign ministry statement, 7 March 2008. A week later, though Russia denied direct links to other events (including Kosovo), Georgia's parliament characterised the withdrawal from the 1996 CIS treaty as an attempt to destabilise the situation in the region and thus "indirectly affect the [NATO] decision" to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP) on the eve of the Bucharest summit.

⁸ "Appeal of the participants of the joint session of the Council of the Parliament of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania and the Presidium of the Parliament of the Republic of South Ossetia on recognition of independence of the Republic of South Ossetia by the Russian Federation", 6 March 2008. "Resolution of the National Assembly of the Republic of Abkhazia" (in Russian), 7 March 2008, at www.mfaabkhazia.org/MFADocuments/Appeal%20of%20Parlament.html.

⁹ "Russian MPs Urge Government over Sovereignty for Georgia Regions", *RIA Novosti*, 21 March 2008.

¹⁰ With this resolution Russia "has deprived itself of any political, legal or moral right to claim the role of a neutral and unbiased mediator in the conflict resolution process", Georgian foreign ministry statement, 24 March 2008.

¹¹ "The Russian President's Instructions to the Russian Federation Government with Regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia", Russian foreign ministry press release, 16 April 2008.

¹² The Georgian foreign ministry called the Russian measure "dangerous" and an attempt "to legalise the de facto annexation" of a large part of Georgia's territory. "Saakashvili Phoned Putin over Russia's 'Aggressive' Moves", *Civil Georgia*, 21 April 2008.

¹³ "The Russian President's Instructions", *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Georgian official, Tbilisi, May 2008.

dialogue stopped,¹⁵ until Minister for Reintegration Yakobashvili visited Moscow on 16 May and President Saakashvili spoke with Russian President Medvedev on the phone on 3 June.

On 25 April, Russia's Ambassador-at-Large Valery Kenyaikin reiterated that Moscow would protect the interests of its citizens living in Georgia's breakaway republics: "In any case we will not leave our citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in difficulty, and this should be clearly understood...if a war is unleashed, we will have to defend our compatriots even through military means. We will use every means to do this; there should be no doubt about this".¹⁶ This language and the troop deployment four days later reassured the Abkhaz on their physical security but at the same time increased their fears of being swallowed by Russia. Many Abkhaz worry that their national cause is being diluted, and they are reverting to minority status in a larger entity by de facto integration into Russia.¹⁷

Russia argued its actions were justified on humanitarian and legal grounds in a detailed foreign ministry statement citing cases in international practice of limited recognition of certain legal acts by de facto authorities. "Contacts [with the de facto authorities and the population] will be directed, first and foremost, at the protection of the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of the Russian citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", the statement insisted.¹⁸

On 30 May Moscow began to move troops – according to some accounts up to 400¹⁹ – into Abkhazia to rehabilitate the railroad from Sukhumi to Ochamchira.²⁰ Georgia strongly protested, calling it a military intervention unconnected to peacekeeping and again accusing Russia of annexation.²¹ It was quickly

supported by a blunt statement from the NATO Secretary General.²²

The Kremlin appears disingenuous when justifying its steps by humanitarian needs, however legitimate, of Abkhaz and Ossetians who have taken Russian passports. Ultimately, however, Sukhumi has no illusions about Russia's motives. It believes Moscow has no plans to recognise independence and is more interested in its territory than its people. The Abkhaz de facto leader, Bagapsh, said, "Russia is interested in access to the sea, of which our territory offers 240km. That is why Georgia needs to think and recognise us as a neutral and demilitarised country".²³ Moscow is also not viewed as showing sufficient respect for its ethnic minorities in the Russian North Caucasus, some of whom are ethnically kin to the Abkhaz.

In reaction to the upgrading of links with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia suspended bilateral talks on Russia's application for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO).²⁴ Russian and Georgian officials claimed the two sides had been close to an agreement on how to deal with segments of their common border that are controlled by the Abkhaz and South Ossetians. Tbilisi insists it will not go back to the table until Russia rescinds its measures and will only agree to Russia's WTO membership if trade at crossing points between Russia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia is legalised.²⁵ But Tbilisi should consider whether its interests might be better served by Russia joining the WTO. Georgia could then utilise that or-

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹⁶ "Russia Warns Georgia Could Use Force against Abkhazia, S. Ossetia", *RIA Novosti*, 25 April 2008; "Russia Threatens Georgia with Force over Separatists", Reuters, 25 April 2008.

¹⁷ Crisis Group email correspondence, May 2008.

¹⁸ "Russian MFA Information and Press Department Commentary on Legal Aspects of Recent Russian Initiatives Regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia", 29 April 2008

¹⁹ "Georgia Protests Russian Rail Deployment in Abkhazia", *Agence France-Presse*, 31 May 2008.

²⁰ "In accordance with the Russian president's decree on humanitarian aid to Abkhazia and a request by the Abkhazian authorities, units from the Russian Railroad Troops and special non-military equipment have been dispatched to rebuild railroads and infrastructure [in Abkhazia]", defence ministry statement (in Russian), 31 May 2008.

²¹ Russia "started to enlarge its military infrastructure in Abkhazia, Georgia ... to prepare for a large-scale military

aggression against Georgia", the Georgian foreign ministry said, 31 May 2008. On the same day, the U.S. State Department said it was "dismayed by Russia's Defence Ministry announcement on May 31 that it intends to send more military forces, including railroad construction troops, into the Georgian region of Abkhazia without the consent of the Georgian Government".

²² He said, "I am concerned...this deployment of Russian Railway Forces does not appear to have any legal basis.... These forces should be withdrawn", statement released 3 June, available at www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-076e.html.

²³ "If Kosovo Can be Independent, Abkhazia Can As Well", Interview with Sergei Bagapsh, *El Pais*, 7 May 2008.

²⁴ This blocked multilateral negotiations which must precede WTO membership. Russia has finalised bilateral agreements with the U.S. and EU. The EU, as its biggest trade partner, has an interest in Russian membership. Other than the Georgia agreement, Russia needs only a bilateral agreement with Saudi Arabia to enter the multilateral negotiations which can finalise its membership.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Georgian official, Tbilisi, May 2008. See also "Tbilisi's Position on Russia's WTO Entry Unchanged", *Civil Georgia*, 26 May 2008.

ganisation's dispute settlement body and other trade regulating mechanisms to its benefit.

Georgia also announced it would prosecute Russians involved in business in Abkhazia not subject to Georgian law. Russians have been investing, especially in real estate along the coast, in Sukhumi and to its north, though much of this property belonged to Georgians before the 1990s war who have not been able to return and for whom no compensation mechanism exists.²⁶ Russia is using Abkhazia's infrastructure and resources as it prepares for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi some 40km away.²⁷ Georgia calls such use of Abkhaz territory without its consent annexation.²⁸ Russia should recognise the Olympics are an important reason why stable peace in Abkhazia is in its interest. Any escalation leading to further instability could undermine participation. If Moscow contributes to such escalation, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) would have grounds to reconsider its decision to give the Games to Sochi.²⁹

B. SECURITY INCIDENTS AND MILITARY BUILD-UP

In March and April 2008, the situation also deteriorated worryingly on the ground and in the air. On 18 March, Abkhaz de facto authorities claimed they downed an unmanned Georgian spy aircraft over their territory. Georgia denied any loss, though wreckage was shown to journalists in Sukhumi.³⁰ On 20 April,

²⁶ Abkhaz de facto legislation does not allow non-citizens to purchase land; Russian investors are thus buying leaseholds.

²⁷ An agreement was signed in May 2008 by de facto President Bagapsh and the governor of Krasnodar region, Tkachov, on the use of Abkhaz construction materials for Sochi development. Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov said in 2007 that it was difficult to imagine holding the Olympics in Sochi without the participation of "such a kind neighbour as Abkhazia". "Georgia: Sochi Winter Olympics Could Impact Frozen Conflicts", *Eurasia Insight*, 7 November 2007. An international organisation operating in Abkhazia is, according to its head, starting to lose human resources to the Olympic preparations. Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, May 2008.

²⁸ "If Abkhazia is used for the Olympics without the consent of the Georgian central government, that will be an annexation", David Bakradze, then conflict resolution minister, quoted in "Rebel Region Looks to Cash in on Winter Olympics", ABC News, 7 October 2007.

²⁹ The IOC can withdraw its decision on organising the Games in a specific host city "in the event of non-compliance with the Olympic Charter or other regulations or instructions of the IOC, or a breach of the obligations" taken by the host, Olympic Charter, Article 37.2.

³⁰ On 20 March 2008, the de facto parliament of Abkhazia warned that "[s]ystematic flights of Georgian aircraft over

Sukhumi claimed it shot down a second drone. This time Georgian officials, after initial denials, admitted the loss but blamed it on a Russian MIG-29 fighter. They released video allegedly transmitted by the drone's onboard camera, which, they claimed, was undeniable evidence of Russian involvement. They added that radar records showed the jet had taken off from a military base in Gudauta, Abkhazia³¹ and had flown to Russia after downing the drone.³² A UN investigation largely confirmed Georgia's version of events.³³

Saakashvili spoke of an "unprovoked aggression against the sovereign territory of Georgia".³⁴ Putin assigned responsibility to Georgia, saying flights over the conflict zone contradicted the spirit and meaning of the 1994 Moscow Agreement on a ceasefire and separation of forces and escalated tensions.³⁵ Security Council resolutions oblige the sides to keep the area "free of any unauthorised military activities",³⁶ but Georgia argued the drones were unarmed, hence the overflights were not military activity.³⁷ After the 18 March and 20 April incidents, the Abkhaz de facto authorities claimed to have shot down a further five

Abkhaz airspace for reconnaissance purposes, in combination with the deployment of armed forces" indicated Georgia had "taken a course towards preparation for another military invasion of the Republic of Abkhazia". "Abkhaz MPs Warn Against Possible Armed Conflict", *Civil Georgia*, 21 March 2008.

³¹ The Abkhaz and Russian sides say the military base in Gudauta is not operational; Tbilisi claims it is. The decision at the 1999 Istanbul summit of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) about the closure of Russian bases in Georgia applies to Gudauta, but the Georgians claim that only weapons and military equipment restricted by the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) have been removed, while about 300 Russian troops remain; "Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the Military Bases of the Russian Federation Located on the Territory of Georgia", 10 March 2005.

³² The Russian foreign ministry released an information commentary claiming the video was fabricated, and the drone had been shot down by an Abkhaz aircraft, 29 April 2008.

³³ "Report of UNOMIG on the Incident of 20 April Involving the Downing of a Georgian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle over the Zone of Conflict", released 26 May 2008, available at www.unomig.org/data/other/080526_unomig_report.pdf.

³⁴ "Georgia-Russia Tension Escalates over Downed Drone", *The New York Times*, 22 April 2008.

³⁵ "Vladimir Putin had a telephone conversation with Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili", Russian foreign ministry, 21 April 2008.

³⁶ Resolution 1808 of 15 April 2008 again obliged the parties "to maintain the security zone and the restricted weapons zone free of any unauthorized military activities".

³⁷ Tbilisi argues reconnaissance is needed because Russia's motives are untrustworthy and challenge Georgia's national security.

Georgian drones on 4, 8 and 12 May. On 5 May, Georgia announced withdrawal from the 1995 CIS agreement on the "Creation of the Integrated Air Defence System of CIS Member States" and urged the UN to investigate the presence and utilisation of air defence systems by the de facto Abkhaz authorities.³⁸ The UN report released in late May concluded that the flights constitute military action and contravene the 1994 Moscow Agreement; Georgia pledged to suspend them on 30 May.³⁹

The Russian defence ministry announced on 29 April 2008 that it was increasing its peacekeepers in Abkhazia within limits envisaged by the 1994 Moscow Agreement, asserting "a rise in provocations by Georgian power structures" against CIS peacekeepers as justification.⁴⁰ In a separate statement that day, the foreign ministry explained the decision by Georgia's "provocative acts", apparently a reference to the drone flights as well as the alleged stationing of 1,500 troops in the Tbilisi-controlled Upper Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia. The UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) said it had seen no increase of Georgian personnel in Kodori,⁴¹ and Tbilisi called the Russian action "military aggression", but Moscow argued that it deployed more troops "for the prevention of any possibility of a renewal of bloodshed in the Caucasus".⁴²

Tbilisi said that while the increase may not go against the letter of earlier agreements, it defied their spirit.⁴³

³⁸ Georgian foreign ministry statement, 5 May 2008.

³⁹ "Report of UNOMIG", op. cit. The report concluded that "the overflight of the zone of conflict by surveillance aircraft constitutes a breach of the Moscow Agreement" but also that "the enforcement action by ... the Russian Federation – in the zone of conflict is fundamentally inconsistent with the Moscow Agreement and ... undercuts the ceasefire and separation of forces regime". "Georgia Halted Drone Flights over Abkhazia: envoy", Agence France-Presse, 30 May 2008.

⁴⁰ "Russia Warns of Harsh Response to Georgian Provocations", *RIA Novosti*, 29 April 2008; the Russian defence ministry press release is available at <http://mil.ru/info/1069/details/index.shtml?id=41981>.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, UNOMIG official, Tbilisi, 2 May 2008. UNOMIG confirmed its findings in a press release, 8 May 2008: "To date, they [UNOMIG patrols] have not reported any build-up of security forces in those areas by either side. The Mission continues to call on both sides to maintain a posture of restraint and urges once again the resumption of the security dialogue".

⁴² "Georgia: Moscow's Move To Bolster Peacekeepers Angers Tbilisi, Worries EU", RFE/RL Report, 30 April 2008; Georgian foreign ministry statement, 29 April 2008; also "Georgia Urges Russia Not to Enlarge Peacekeeping Force in Conflict Zones", Tass, 29 April 2008; and "Georgia Accuses Russia of Aggression", *Kommersant*, 30 April 2008.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Georgian official, Tbilisi, May 2008.

At least some of the new troops are reportedly stationed in barracks outside the conflict zone. The biggest cause for concern from Tbilisi's point of view is their equipment, such as D-30 Howitzers with a 15-km firing range.⁴⁴

Georgia mainly responded diplomatically, but several sources, including senior diplomats, confirmed that the western Georgian military base in Senaki was strengthened and put on combat alert.⁴⁵ The same was reportedly true for interior ministry elements along the ceasefire line and in Upper Kodori.⁴⁶ An international expert said Tbilisi's suggestion to the Abkhaz to increase the number of interior ministry troops on both sides of the ceasefire line from 600 to 2,000 was viewed in Sukhumi as an indication of present Georgian strength in the area.⁴⁷

Two mid-level Georgian commanders stationed in Upper Kodori told Crisis Group there is no need for additional military preparations there. They say all necessary military hardware, offensive and defensive, is already present, and the terrain was prepared for movement of heavy vehicles in summer 2007, when Tbilisi built roads and bridges to develop the area.⁴⁸ A senior diplomat confirmed that the area's infrastructure has been developed, including with communications well beyond the needs of its several hundred local inhabitants.⁴⁹ Additional sources also indicated that weapons and other military items have been sent to Kodori. An interlocutor from Zugdidi said he witnessed temporary deployment of military equipment in villages by the ceasefire line.⁵⁰ According to local reports, interior ministry personnel have recently rented houses in Zugdidi.⁵¹

Georgian veterans of the 1990s war in Abkhazia and other ex-combatants reportedly were put on alert by

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tbilisi, April 2008.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, international expert, Tbilisi, 4 May. Interior ministry forces have been used in past Tbilisi military operations, including the 2004 resumption of hostilities in South Ossetia; they have also been introduced into areas to increase Tbilisi's use-of-force capabilities without formally violating provision of the ceasefire agreements.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, April 2008.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tbilisi, 2 May 2008.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, April 2008.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Gali inhabitant, Tbilisi, May 2008. According to the source, wives of the officers now stationed in Zugdidi said their husbands were promised houses in Abkhazia for "successful duty".

Tbilisi.⁵² So-called partisan groups, such as the Forest Brothers and White Legions, who in former President Shevardnadze's time were used by the state, had been largely disarmed under Saakashvili. In the past four months, however, a source with contacts to the groups said, they have become active again, and official structures have sought to enlist their support.⁵³

Tensions peaked once more on 18 May, as Georgian security forces detained six,⁵⁴ and by some accounts sixteen,⁵⁵ Russian peacekeepers in Zugdidi. According to Tbilisi accounts, the Russians (allegedly drunk) entered the town without notifying the Georgians and crashed into a car, injuring a woman.⁵⁶ Prime Minister Gurgenzidze said this "demonstrates to everyone that the [current peacekeeping] format should be changed....Cases of this kind indicate on extremely low level of Russian peacekeepers' professionalism".⁵⁷ The Russians disputed the story, accusing Tbilisi of engineering the incident and claiming the peacekeepers were on regular rotation about which the Georgians had been informed.

C. THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

The international community reacted to the Russian moves with unusually strong statements. The first criticism came after Moscow announced it was upgrading ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. EU High Representative Javier Solana's statement⁵⁸ was followed rapidly by the UK⁵⁹ and the U.S., the latter of which declared "unshakable support" for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty.⁶⁰ The EU Presi-

dency said Moscow's move "risks further increasing tensions and undermines the international peace efforts where the Russian Federation participates too", and called on Moscow not to implement its decision.⁶¹

After a 23 April 2008 emergency Security Council session on Georgia, the four Western members of the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary-General on Georgia (but not Russia) issued a statement expressing concern at the implications of the Russian measure and calling on Moscow to revoke, or at least not implement it.⁶² President Saakashvili praised the statement and noted it was the first time the Group of Friends "was divided", with Russia alone.⁶³

The reaction to the Russian troop increases was somewhat more nuanced. The EU said it was "seriously concerned" and urged "all parties involved to refrain from any actions that could lead towards the escalation of the situation in the region".⁶⁴ The U.S. urged Russia the next day "to reconsider" its decision.⁶⁵ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, "the fact is, as I understand it, it's still within certain limits permitted by the peacekeeping arrangements there. But since I don't believe that Georgia intends to attack Abkhazia, I don't see the necessity of it".⁶⁶ Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried went further in expressing sympathy for Tbilisi: "Even though we do counsel restraint on the Georgians, they are the vulnerable party, and it is their territory that is under threat".⁶⁷ Quiet warnings have also been relayed to Tbilisi against any military adventure,⁶⁸ but there is

⁵² Fighting-age Abkhaz veterans tend to be on a near permanent state of alert.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, expert with contacts in the interior ministry, Tbilisi, April 2008.

⁵⁴ "Russian Peacekeepers Briefly Held in Zugdidi", Civil Georgia, 18 May 2008.

⁵⁵ "Russian Peacekeepers had wandered in Zugdidi", *Kommersant*, 19 May 2008.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "Russian Peacekeepers Briefly Held in Zugdidi", Civil Georgia, 18 May 2008.

⁵⁸ "EU Concerned as Russia Boosts Links with Georgian Regions", EU Business News, 16 April, 2008.

⁵⁹ Sir Brian Fall, the UK Special Representative for the South Caucasus, in "Georgian Minister Discusses Abkhazia", Foreign and Commonwealth Office Press Office, 16 April 2004.

⁶⁰ The U.S. Department of State 16 April 2008 daily press briefing and a separate statement on 18 April. The U.S. ambassador to the OSCE, Julie Finley, accused Russia of "openly siding with the separatists, calling into question

Russia's facilitator role", U.S. OSCE Mission statement, 17 April 2008.

⁶¹ "Declaration of the Presidency on Behalf of the European Union on Georgia", 18 April 2008. Member states reportedly reached a unified position quickly, Crisis Group interview, EU diplomat, April 2008.

⁶² "Statement by Germany, France, Britain, U.S. on Russia's Georgia Move", Civil Georgia, 24 April 2008.

⁶³ "Moscow Downplays UN Security Council Meeting on Georgia", Civil Georgia, 25 April 2008.

⁶⁴ "Declaration of the Presidency", op. cit. On 29 April Solana called the increase unwise, even if it did not exceed legal limits.

⁶⁵ "U.S. Calls on Russia to Reconsider Abkhaz Moves", Civil Georgia, 1 May 2008.

⁶⁶ "Rice Concerned over Increase in Russian Troops in Abkhazia", Civil Georgia, 2 May 2008. She also called for a broad solution to address the legitimate needs of the diverse populations of the two areas within the context of Georgian sovereignty. "Rice Questions Need for More Russian Troops in Troubled Georgian Areas", Voice of America News (VOA), 1 May 2008.

⁶⁷ "US Concerned That Tensions Between Russia and Georgia Could Escalate", VOA News, 8 May 2008.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Tbilisi, 2 May 2008.

some concern among European diplomats that the U.S. may not be sufficiently unequivocal in urging Tbilisi to cease belligerent rhetoric, drone flights and any thought of an offensive in Abkhazia.⁶⁹

While Georgia has welcomed the criticism directed to Russia, both Georgian and Western officials believe it has had limited impact.⁷⁰ Tbilisi is frustrated and feels it has ever less manoeuvring room. It would especially like the West to say clearly that Russia has compromised its neutrality as a peacekeeper and mediator. It has also been lobbying Brussels for a statement that the EU has no plans to recognise Abkhazia.⁷¹ According to Tbilisi, this would provide crucial motivation for Sukhumi to negotiate in earnest, but EU member states appear to have virtually no interest in such a statement.⁷²

III. RISKS AND INTERNAL DYNAMICS

Tbilisi urges a peaceful resolution to the conflict, but influential hawks in the government, especially in some of its power centres, and several key National Movement parliamentarians are pushing for more robust action. Some seem to favour a military offensive in Abkhazia, either as a reaction to a Russian provocation or after an arranged incident, so as to regain as much territory as quickly as possible and then partition the region until such time as all Abkhazia can be regained.

The entire ruling elite agrees that the top priority is restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity, but the hawks do not believe they will ever get the help they need from U.S. and EU statements or confidence building with the Abkhaz.⁷³ An influential National Movement parliamentarian said on 17 March, "we will continue very active and very vigorous attempts to restore our territorial integrity as soon as possible, through diplomatic means, but if these means are not enough, we will manage to do it with the help of our armed forces".⁷⁴ President Saakashvili emphasises a peaceful solution but is locking himself into unrealistic timeframes.⁷⁵ He seems to perceive reunification as an historical mission that must be accomplished during his presidency.⁷⁶

So far moderates, urging caution so as to protect foreign direct investment (FDI) and economic development, appear to have kept the upper hand.⁷⁷ Georgia received a strong reality check when FDI plummeted after the government responded with disproportionate force on 7 November 2007 to public political protests.⁷⁸ A military adventure would also risk depriving the country of its Euro-Atlantic perspective and Western partners.⁷⁹

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁷⁰ "Russia Brushes off Western Call to Revoke Abkhaz, S. Ossetia Move", *Civil Georgia*, 24 April 2008; and Crisis Group correspondence, European government official, April 2008.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Georgian official, Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Georgian analysts and officials, Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁷⁴ "Senior MP does not Rule out Use of Force to Restore Territorial Integrity", *Civil Georgia*, 18 April 2004.

⁷⁵ President Saakashvili's campaign speech at the National Movement Party Congress on 25 November 2007.

⁷⁶ His current term expires in 2013.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, international experts, Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁷⁸ For information on the political protests, see Crisis Group Report, *Sliding towards Authoritarianism?*, op. cit. According to Prime Minister Gurgenedze, the political upheavals reduced anticipated GDP growth for 2008 from 11 per cent to 6 per cent. "Georgia to Push Through Reforms Despite Turmoil", *Financial Times*, 15 January 2008.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior official, May 2008.

But even if Tbilisi rejects an offensive military option, Russia's increasingly sharp measures could provoke it into a rash response. The Saakashvili administration has identified several red lines that, if crossed, would trigger a military response. These include attacks on Gali and Upper Kodori and an increase of Russian forces in Abkhazia beyond a limit which Tbilisi could comfortably counter if need be. Another would be a level of official Russian representation in Abkhazia sufficient to imply recognition of independence.⁸⁰ The last two are fluid, somewhat subjective criteria.⁸¹ Even though Russia likely wants to avoid war, it could inadvertently cross such a line; moreover, a localised provocation or an accident could cut across the calculations of all sides. Georgian politics provide another element of uncertainty. For example, Saakashvili might feel the need to take strong action in response to domestic pressures such as the opposition's determination to prevent the first session of the heavily pro-government parliament elected on 21 May, or in the event the hawks on his team get the upper hand.

A. THE MILITARY OPTION

Individuals closely linked to the Georgian administration speculate that war in Abkhazia is a real possibility. Already in February 2008 a senior official called it, probably excessively, a 50-50 chance,⁸² but as relations with Moscow spiral downward, the odds are not improving. Frustration with the status quo is such that some in Tbilisi would favour any action to change it.

For close to two years, President Saakashvili's inner circle has discussed partitioning Abkhazia by launching a military offensive to regain as much of its territory as possible, ideally including Sukhumi.⁸³ Such a partition might be militarily more feasible than taking back all of Abkhazia. It might also limit the guerrilla war with the Abkhaz which would almost inevitably follow. Some in Tbilisi may even think that it might force the Abkhaz to negotiate. Some among the ruling elite now consider this the only option, though the

president allegedly remains hesitant.⁸⁴ According to a well-connected source, Prime Minister Gurgenzidze argued against the use of force in National Security Council discussions over Russia's recent moves.⁸⁵

As was made most evident in November 2007, there is an element of unpredictability within the Georgian leadership, but it is more likely that the talk of possible military action is mainly meant to entice the West into promising Tbilisi stronger support, including a tangible commitment to changing the peacekeeping and negotiations mechanisms, as discussed below. A military operation is more likely to be triggered by a security incident spiralling out of control or Russia crossing one of Tbilisi's red lines than by a premeditated decision to fight Russia. Even the hawks in Tbilisi are aware that would lead to a risky confrontation with the Russian army and one in which Western diplomatic support would most probably be withdrawn.

According to advocates of a partition plan, however, a land operation along roads and through mountain passes in Abkhazia's Georgian-inhabited areas could return the Gali and Ochamchira districts to Tbilisi's control. The Georgians would most likely attempt a two-pronged attack on Sukhumi from the Gali district (south) and Kodori (east). Gali is inhabited exclusively by ethnic Georgian returnees; Ochamchira, formerly ethnically divided, is now largely depopulated. The aim would be to reach Sukhumi and the Gulryps region around it so as to divide Abkhazia along the Gumista River.⁸⁶ Tbilisi knows that taking and retaining Sukhumi would be difficult, but according to at least one high-level security sector official, it is confident it could take Gali, Ochamchira and perhaps the Gulryps region, though the operation might require months.

Kodori is isolated, however, and the narrow gorge which leads down to the rest of Abkhazia is easy to defend from the surrounding heights. If the Georgian army went through the gorge, its losses would likely be high. Any operation through the Gali district would be risky. While Tbilisi counts on the 45,000-65,000 ethnic Georgians who have returned there to be friendly,⁸⁷ the population would more likely flee than join the fighting. As discussed below, the Gali returnees have been on the receiving end of harassment and

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Georgian official, Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁸¹ Tbilisi feels hard pressed by the combination of Russian moves in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. An official said if it reacted forcefully to a Russian-funded base, including air-defence systems, being built in South Ossetia's Java Valley, it might be able to take back South Ossetia but would lose Abkhazia for ever.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, senior Georgian official, February 2008.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Tbilisi, 2006, and Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, official, Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, April 2008.

⁸⁶ The Gumista River just north of Sukhumi was the main dividing line between Georgian and Abkhaz forces for most of the 1992-1993 war.

⁸⁷ For more on Gali returns, see Crisis Group Report, *Ways Forward*, op. cit., pp. 19-22.

human rights abuses by both the Abkhaz and the Georgians. They have competing loyalties, especially since Sukhumi controls the area where their homes are. That they mostly refrained from fighting in 1992-1993 greatly facilitated their return. If there was an Abkhaz or Russian riposte to a Georgian incursion, large numbers of civilians could be caught in the crossfire.

Some have speculated that the partition solution would only be possible if choreographed with Russia, which might give up its influence over the part of Abkhazia where its investment is lowest in return for security for the 2014 Sochi Olympics.⁸⁸ But with the bilateral dialogue nearly frozen and Russia maintaining a strong hand, it is difficult to see how agreement could be reached. Any scripted partition of Abkhazia would also be a tough sell in Georgia.

B. MILITARY CAPABILITIES

In the past several years, Georgia has significantly increased its military budget and capabilities, boosting some hawks' confidence that it could prevail in a military scenario. Defence expenditure in 2007 was GEL1.495 billion (approximately \$922 million), more than double that of 2006 and 8.8 per cent of its GDP.⁸⁹ Although the defence budget was significantly cut after the November 2007 political crisis, it is still high in 2008 at GEL 1.1 billion (approximately \$679 million), 5.6 per cent of GDP.⁹⁰ Georgia argues large sums are needed to restructure the army to NATO standards and increase defensive capabilities, but the acquisitions also involve strong offensive capabilities, especially for the ground forces.⁹¹ The military benefits from significant foreign training and other assistance. Especially valued is the small-unit combat training provided by former high-ranking Israeli soldiers working as independent contractors with their government's tacit approval.⁹²

According to the defence ministry website, Georgia has some 27,000 in its armed forces. An additional

1,600 active reserves staff the national guard, and there are 11,700 paramilitary troops between the border and coast guards and the interior ministry.⁹³ A 100,000-strong reserve⁹⁴ is being prepared, but only a quarter to a half is already trained.⁹⁵ All males between eighteen and 40 receive three weeks of training. According to Crisis Group observation, this is efficiently organised, and there are detailed plans for twelve-, 24- and 48-hour mobilisations. Each reservist is assigned a number, a uniform, a gun and a near-domicile location at which to report.⁹⁶ The training appeals to citizens' patriotic values. A popular informal army slogan: "Don't sleep Malkhaz [a Georgian name], wait for an attack from the Abkhaz", speaks for itself.

It is unclear, however, whether Tbilisi has realistically assessed Russian reaction capabilities. It would be a serious mistake to underestimate the strength Russia could bring to bear from nearby areas.⁹⁷ In 2005, well into the normalisation phase of the second Chechen War, it still had 80,000 troops in Chechnya alone.⁹⁸ Overall its military presence in what it calls the SKVO, the North Caucasian Military District, includes at least 90,000 troops.⁹⁹ A Georgian source claimed that a 1,000-strong elite paratrooper unit from Novosibirsk was among the new peacekeepers in Abkhazia.¹⁰⁰

Tbilisi discounts the Abkhaz side in its military calculations, even though sources in Sukhumi express con-

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Tbilisi, April 2008.

⁸⁹ For detail, see Crisis Group Report, *Sliding towards Authoritarianism?*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

⁹⁰ The government's five-year plan envisages a further decrease to 2.3 per cent of GDP in 2012. The defence ministry's budget is to drop from the current GEL 1.1 billion to GEL 950 million (approximately \$633 million) in 2009 and 2010 and to GEL 900 million (approximately \$600 million) in 2011 and 2012. "Key Directions and Indicators for 2008-2012" (in Georgian), 6 May 2008, at www.parliament.ge.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Tbilisi, 2007-2008.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, May 2008.

⁹³ "The Military Balance 2008", International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), February 2008, pp. 77-78.

⁹⁴ Saakashvili said in March 2008 that Georgia had 33,000 serving troops and 100,000 reservists. "Saakashvili Says 'No' to Treaty on Non-Use of Force", Civil Georgia, 15 March 2008.

⁹⁵ Sources vary. The defence ministry plans to train some 25,000 yearly. Training began in early 2007.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group observation, reservist training preparatory session, Tbilisi, February 2008.

⁹⁷ Russia has conducted large-scale training in recent years focused on the security of its southern border. "Exercise Caucasian Border 2007", in July of that year, included more than 400 sorties by IL-76, SU-24, SU-25 and SU-27 aircraft, and helicopters. "Military Balance 2008: Russia", International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), p. 208.

⁹⁸ "Troop Levels Remain High", *Chechnya Weekly*, vol. 6, no. 13, 30 March 2005.

⁹⁹ "Military Balance 2008: Russia", op. cit., p. 219.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Georgian official, May 2008. This claim would appear inconsistent with the Russian defence ministry's assertion that the total reinforcement of peacekeepers was only 545 troops, unless some portion of the unit was counted as replacement for other elements rotating out of the area.

fidence in their defence capacities.¹⁰¹ The Abkhaz have lived in a siege mentality for more than a decade. Much of the population, men and women alike, fought in the 1992-1993 war and would do so again to defend their homes.¹⁰² Sukhumi could mobilise at least 15,000 on terrain conducive to sustained guerilla resistance.¹⁰³ The proliferation of small arms in the territory would add to the difficulty of Georgia securing a decisive military victory. During the Kodori crises of 2002 and 2006, the Abkhaz mobilised and deployed in the nearby Tkvarcheli mountain areas.

Abkhaz forces have also benefited from Russian support. According to senior Abkhaz officials, their troops have the capacity to fire rockets or bombs across the ceasefire line into Zugdidi should there be a Georgian attack.¹⁰⁴ They have received training from Russian military and intelligence experts and, by some accounts, have significantly upgraded their weapons and equipment.¹⁰⁵ Abkhazia might also reach agreement with Russia on military bases and military cooperation.¹⁰⁶ In May 2008 the de facto president, Sergei Bagapsh, proposed that Russia open a military base.¹⁰⁷ According to a Georgian government source, 1,000 to 2,000 additional advisers came to Sukhumi this spring.¹⁰⁸ An international expert, however, called this figure much too high,¹⁰⁹ while another said the Georgians have deliberately exaggerated Russian deployments.¹¹⁰

Those in Tbilisi keen on a military operation seem to think it could be confined to Abkhazia, though they do worry about air raids on Georgia proper.¹¹¹ But such an escalation might trigger a large regional conflict, even spilling into the North Caucasus. A second front would likely be opened at least in South Ossetia, since Tskhinvali and Sukhumi have agreements on mutual military support. According to an Abkhaz official, this means rockets from South Ossetia would target Tbilisi.¹¹² Volunteers from the North Caucasus

might well enter Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹¹³ A Georgian government source claimed Chechen troops from the "Zapad" battalion are already in South Ossetia.¹¹⁴ If a war started, Georgia's main east-west highway, which passes close to South Ossetia, would be a natural target, and Georgian-populated villages in South Ossetia would be at risk.

C. TIMING

A government source has said that any military operation would happen after the 21 May 2008 election but before the height of the tourist season in Abkhazia.¹¹⁵ Georgia knows the West would react harshly to any such adventure but may consider that at least the U.S. reaction would be somewhat milder as long as the Bush administration, which has given it nearly unequivocal support, is still in office.

The worrying unpredictability of Georgian actions stems largely from the difficulty of knowing the thought processes of the tight inner circle around President Saakashvili, a group that seems to make its analyses and draw its conclusions in a virtual vacuum. The risk of a rash move is compounded because the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts and the relationship with Russia trigger highly emotional reactions. Saakashvili himself is a volatile personality. Those close to him say he can rapidly change his position as a result of entirely subjective factors.¹¹⁶ His reactions to developments in the conflict regions and statements by Russian politicians seem visceral, a characteristic that, some argue, Moscow skilfully plays on.¹¹⁷

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group correspondence, expert, May 2008.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, 2006-2007.

¹⁰³ "Отложенный статус отложенной войны" ["The delayed status of a delayed war"], Utró online, 17 March 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group correspondence, May 2008.

¹⁰⁵ "Possible Outcomes of a Georgian-Abkhazian war", *RIA Novosti*, 5 May 2008.

¹⁰⁶ Bagapsh interview, *El Pais*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁷ "Russian Air Force commander backs idea of Abkhazia military base", *RIA Novosti*, 15 May 2008.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group correspondence, international expert, May 2008.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, expert, Brussels, May 2008.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, official, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹¹² Crisis Group correspondence, May 2008.

¹¹³ Cherkess and Chechen volunteers under the umbrella of the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, fought in 1992-1993 on the Abkhaz side. Allegedly, they would be available to do so again. Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Tbilisi, 2007-2008. According to some accounts, a congress of veteran volunteers in Cherkessia on 27 April 2008 resolved that "in case Georgia attempts to restore control over Abkhazia by force, volunteers will go again to help the brother nation [Abkhazia]". There are reports the congress formed a common structure for war veterans from Abkhazia, Adygeya, Karachay-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria. "Georgia has unified the nations of Caucasian: volunteers from Russia are ready to fight for Abkhazia" (in Russian), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 19 April 2008.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi and Brussels, March 2008.

¹¹⁷ "Paata Zakareishvili: Saakashvili Will Start a New War in Abkhazia before the Threat of a Revolution in Georgia" (in Russian), *Day.az*, 2 May 2007.

The current crisis developed in parallel to the domestic tensions that accompanied the 21 May parliamentary elections. The ruling United National Movement (UNM) secured an overwhelming victory, taking 120 of the 150 seats.¹¹⁸ “Even I was astonished by the big level of support which we got in these parliamentary elections”, Saakashvili said.¹¹⁹ But the opposition cried foul and rejected the outcome, citing irregularities, procedural violations and voter intimidation.¹²⁰

The International Election Observation Mission¹²¹ (IEOM) gave a hesitantly positive assessment,¹²² noting that the authorities “made efforts to conduct these elections in line with OSCE and Council of Europe commitments”, but also identified “a number of problems which made this implementation uneven and incomplete”.¹²³ These included the change of the electoral system two months before the elections without opposition agreement;¹²⁴ intimidation of candidates, party activists and state employees; the unbalanced party composition of the election commission; and a blurring of state activities and the UNM campaign.¹²⁵

Crisis Group did not formally observe the elections but it collected data on significant tampering, though

relatively little of it on the actual election day. According to a chairperson of an electoral commission, pressure was put on chairpersons to deliver precincts to the UNM, and UNM staff intervened to ensure a victory.¹²⁶ Opposition activists in areas where Crisis Group observed complained of severe intimidation and said many opposition supporters were excluded from voter lists.¹²⁷ A source told Crisis Group amnesty was offered to detainees whose family members organised several hundred votes for the UNM.¹²⁸ Multiple sources said civil servants were threatened with loss of jobs if they did not vote for the ruling party.¹²⁹ An activist said opposition supporters were warned their children would have problems at school.¹³⁰ Severe intimidation is reportedly continuing after the elections.¹³¹

Before election day, opposition threats contributed to the tense atmosphere. One of its leaders, Levan Gachechiladze, said, “if the 21 May parliamentary elections are rigged, like the 5 January [presidential election] was, the opposition will call for a people’s rebellion....If Saakashvili wants a new revolution, he will have it, but it won’t be a velvet revolution”.¹³² On 26 May, the opposition called a mass protest, and up to 50,000 demonstrators marched towards the main thoroughfare, Rustaveli, where a military parade was underway to celebrate independence day. Special forces in full anti-riot gear were mobilised but backed off, and there were no major incidents.

The opposition insists that it will prevent the first session of the new parliament on 10 June. It says it will also annul its party lists, reject the mandates it won¹³³ and create an “alternative Parliament”. President Saakashvili said, “the minority should ... respect the will of the majority. Dialogue is the only alternative. Nothing can threaten Georgia’s institutions”.¹³⁴ Prospects for such dialogue are slim, but if the government continues to act with restraint to demonstrations,

¹¹⁸ The United Opposition gained sixteen seats, the recently established Christian Democrats and Labourites six seats each and the Republican Party two. These preliminary results may still change slightly.

¹¹⁹ “Georgia: Opposition Disputes President’s Claim of Party Victory”, RFE/RL Report, 22 May 2008.

¹²⁰ “Georgia: Opposition Announces Plan for Alternative Parliament”, EurasiaNet, 27 May 2008.

¹²¹ The IEOM is a joint undertaking of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

¹²² Some individual observers, especially European parliamentarians, offered unqualified endorsement: “[T]he electoral laws were fulfilled to the last letter....There was 100 per cent transparency, if ever there was a transparent election, it was this one”, Walburga Habsburg-Douglas, chair of Sweden’s OSCE delegation, in the Georgian Government’s “Update Note”, 22 May 2008.

¹²³ “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions on the 21 May 2008 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia”, OSCE/ODIHR, 22 May 2008.

¹²⁴ On 21 March 2008, the parliament finalised the amendment to the Unified Election Code, increasing the number of single-mandate constituencies in the new parliament from 50 to 75 and reducing the number of those elected by the proportional party-list system from 100 to 75. “Controversial Constitutional Amendment Passed”, Civil Georgia, 12 March 2008.

¹²⁵ “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions”, op. cit.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, opposition activists, Kvemo Kartli, May 2008.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, opposition activist, Kvemo Kartli, May 2008.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, international human rights monitor, Tbilisi, June 2008.

¹³² “Opposition Coalition Steps Up Anti-Saakashvili Rhetoric”, Civil Georgia, 8 April 2008.

¹³³ Mamuka Katsitadze, on the political talk show “Prime Time”, First Channel, Georgian TV, 26 May 2008.

¹³⁴ “Georgia: Opposition Announces Plans for ‘Alternative Parliament’”, EurasiaNet, 27 May 2008.

as it has since the November 2007 events, it seems most likely that the opposition will be unable to mobilise large-scale, sustained street protests.

D. RUSSIA'S INTERNAL DYNAMICS

Policy formulation under Putin has become increasingly opaque. Inter-agency coordination no longer functions,¹³⁵ decision making is "segmented" among commercial and institutional interests (including Gazprom and the Federal Security Service (FSB)), and the leadership does not always seem to take a big picture view of foreign policy.¹³⁶ Putin makes the decisions on issues of deep personal interest, which include NATO expansion and relations with Georgia,¹³⁷ and this is unlikely to change now that he has exchanged the presidency for the prime minister's office. He dislikes losing face, keeps count of slights or setbacks, and does his best to even the score.¹³⁸

The foreign ministry plays at best a secondary role in these foreign policy issues. The Georgia portfolio is mainly handled by Russia's "power ministries", in particular the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the military intelligence services.¹³⁹ However, Foreign Minister Lavrov, despite his harsh rhetoric (and bad relationship with Condoleezza Rice), does his best to moderate the Russian line, some foreign ministry officials claimed.¹⁴⁰

A key problem with the personal approach to foreign policy, a Russian official admitted, is that while Putin lays out general guidelines, it is left to others to fill in the details.¹⁴¹ By accident or design, this leaves important room for manoeuvre by mid-level officials in the "power ministries" and foreign ministry. Ambassador-at-Large Kenyaikin has no known links to the Kremlin's upper echelons, an official noted, but his belligerent remarks about the Abkhazia situation are disturbing because they probably reflect the attitude of the power structures on the ground, and no one has reined him in.¹⁴²

Unlike in the past, when Putin typically kept a public distance from controversial decisions, he has put his personal weight behind the initiative to formalise links with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus making any retreat difficult. Whereas formerly the Duma typically played the bad cop, Putin himself took the lead only weeks before turning the presidency over to Dimitri Medvedev and becoming prime minister. This can have been a way both to lock in policy and to show that he continues to call the important shots.¹⁴³

In any event, there is little prospect of a quick policy change. Virtual annexation of Abkhazia by stealth and soft integration is likely to continue, and if war were to start, Russia would come to the assistance of its citizens, employing the language of the right to protect to deflect Western criticism. An official who is by no means favourable to current Russian policy or Putin's approach to foreign policy formulation warned that Moscow response to Georgian hostilities would be "very, very harsh".¹⁴⁴

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Rose Gottemoeller, director, Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, 28 April 2008.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Russian official, Moscow, 29 April 2008.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interview, former close Putin staff, Moscow, April 2008.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Moscow, April 2008.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior Georgian official, February 2008, and officials, Moscow, April 2008.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, April 2008.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, April 2008.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interview, Moscow, April 2008.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, international expert, Tbilisi, April 2008. Also, Crisis Group correspondence, international expert, April 2008.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, April 2008.

IV. GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCES

Problems between Tbilisi and Sukhumi and the inter-ethnic conflict¹⁴⁵ are framed by a broader Georgian-Russian clash about the future of the South Caucasus and the shaping of post-Cold War spheres of influence between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Kosovo's declaration of independence on 17 February 2008 and subsequent recognition by over 40 states and the Bucharest NATO summit increased Russia's sense of isolation and reinforced its opposition to Euro-Atlantic expansion to former Soviet countries, especially Georgia and Ukraine.¹⁴⁶ Putin called NATO's plan for eastward expansion "a direct threat" to Russian security and warned his country would retaliate with "necessary measures".¹⁴⁷ While both Ukraine and Georgia have become targets of a more assertive Moscow policy, the difference, according to a Russian official, is "Georgia is an easy target: Saakashvili is easily provoked".¹⁴⁸ Russia uses its influence over Abkhazia and South Ossetia against the Georgian government, but also as a lever in its larger contest with the West.

¹⁴⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Ways Forward*, op. cit. and Crisis Group Europe Report N°176, *Abkhazia Today*, 15 September 2006.

¹⁴⁶ "...[o]ur ideas about the collective leadership of major powers, of shared cooperation between Russia, the EU and the United States, and of strategic transparency are directed toward this goal [resolving common problems together]... [o]ne-sided actions, such as the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence, deployment of U.S. global missile defence elements in Eastern Europe, and the continued lobbying for Georgia and Ukraine's accelerated entry to NATO, are diametrically opposed to this goal", "A Strategic Relationship: From Rivalry to Partnership", Sergei Lavrov, 28 May 2008, at http://rbth.rg.ru/articles/2008_05_WP_06_lavrov.html.

¹⁴⁷ "Vladimir Putin Tells Summit He Wants Security and Friendship", *The Times*, 5 April 2008. Putin's February 2007 Munich speech marked the start of more confrontational relations with the West. Putin accused the U.S. and NATO of "unilateral and frequently illegitimate actions", citing NATO expansion, U.S. anti-missile plans in Eastern Europe and the West's policies in Iraq and Kosovo, and warned of CFE Treaty withdrawal if NATO countries failed to ratify. Speech at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy, www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?sprache=en&id=179. D. Kosyrev, "No Munich in Bucharest", *RIA Novosti*, 4 April 2008. Russia withdrew from the CFE Treaty in April 2007. Some NATO countries had refused to ratify it before Russia withdrew its troops from Georgia and Moldova, as agreed at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul summit.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Moscow, May 2008.

Georgia, as defined by Saakashvili, is caught in a "zero-sum game" with Russia.¹⁴⁹ Its primary interests are to restore its territorial integrity and deepen its ties with the EU and NATO. Russia in turn wants to retain its influence in the South Caucasus, especially to secure its hold on energy corridors and to protect the volatile North Caucasus. Members of the Russian ruling elite and army also have personal economic interests to defend in Abkhazia.¹⁵⁰ The U.S. and the EU are committed to playing a bigger role in the South Caucasus and have generally been sympathetic to Georgia's aspirations, but there are divisions within the EU at the point where some member states' bilateral relations and interests with Russia affect their attitudes to the Georgian-Russian conflict.

Tbilisi and Sukhumi both try to capitalise on their patrons' competing agendas. But neither Washington nor Moscow is likely to step across red lines willingly on behalf of their clients. Moscow does not intend to recognise Abkhazia's independence. Washington will support Georgia's territorial integrity but not fight on Georgia's behalf or openly allow it to fight. Georgia and Abkhazia at times appear to forget these political facts of life and overestimate their importance in the Russia/U.S./EU relationship.

A. NATO AND THE BUCHAREST SUMMIT

A former senior Georgian politician told Crisis Group his Moscow counterparts have always said bluntly, if Tbilisi "turns its back side to the West", Georgia will have no problems in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but if it does not, Abkhazia and South Ossetia "will be a mess".¹⁵¹ Though Georgia has been committed to joining NATO since Shevardnadze's time, the Saakashvili administration has made quick membership a top priority, seeing it as the guarantee for full independence from Russia, security, stability, democratic development and territorial integrity.

NATO has stressed that it will not allow Russia a veto on Georgian and Ukrainian accession. "I think this [Ukraine's and Georgia's membership] can never be a question of 'whether'", Secretary General Jaap de

¹⁴⁹ "Interview transcript: Mikheil Saakashvili", *Financial Times*, 30 March 2008.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Moscow, Sukhumi and Tbilisi, 2007-2008.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, former senior Georgian official, Tbilisi, November 2007. Currently, however, Russia reportedly only pledges to consider assisting Georgia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia if it renounces NATO aspirations. Crisis Group interview, Georgian expert, Tbilisi, May 2008.

Hoop Scheffer said on 2 April 2008. "If these nations fulfil the criteria, and if they want to enter ... through NATO's open door, I think that door should be open".¹⁵²

But Moscow sees NATO's eastward enlargement as a direct threat.¹⁵³ It considers that during the Two-plus-Four negotiations in 1990 on German reunification,¹⁵⁴ Russia was promised there would be no further NATO expansion to the east. A Russian official has said that while this was not included in the official documents, Moscow considers the two waves of enlargement that have already taken place, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and the Baltic States, a breach of informal assurances and mutual understandings.¹⁵⁵ The movement of any political-military alliance of which Russia is not a member up to Russia's borders is considered a national security threat. For some, it is akin to a lower-key Cuban Missile Crisis.¹⁵⁶

Georgia arouses deeper concerns than earlier enlargements because NATO would then be next to the most volatile and vulnerable part of the Russian Federation, the North Caucasus. Some in Moscow see such expansion as primarily an attempt to undermine Russia financially,¹⁵⁷ and indeed a foreign ministry official told Crisis Group Russia would be forced to react by reallocating its financial and military resources accordingly.¹⁵⁸

Georgia approached Bucharest with high hopes. In a January 2008 referendum, 77 per cent of its citizens had favoured NATO membership.¹⁵⁹ The government

had not expected to get immediate membership, but in the run-up to the summit, it strongly lobbied for a Membership Action Plan (MAP),¹⁶⁰ a step towards that goal. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's ambassador to NATO, threatened on 11 March that "the real secession" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would begin as soon as NATO indicated Georgia could join,¹⁶¹ and Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin said that if Georgia joined, it would lose the breakaway territories "forever".¹⁶² Saakashvili, however, warned that "if we don't get [the MAP], that's exactly when they [the Russians] are going to start all kinds of troubles".¹⁶³

Tbilisi enjoyed strong support from the U.S. and mainly Baltic and Central European member states, but Germany, Russia's biggest trading partner,¹⁶⁴ and other member states with close economic and political ties to Moscow (France, Italy, Greece, Spain) opposed MAP, saying the timing was wrong, and it would damage NATO-Russia relations. Georgia's unresolved conflicts and democratic reform shortcomings were other concerns.¹⁶⁵ German Chancellor Angela Merkel was explicit: "Countries that are enmeshed in regional and internal conflicts cannot become NATO members".¹⁶⁶ France said offering Georgia and Ukraine MAP would damage the "balance of power in Europe".¹⁶⁷

The compromise was that neither Georgia nor Ukraine was offered MAP, but the heads of states declared: "We agreed today that these countries will [eventually] become members of NATO".¹⁶⁸ This express if time-indefinite commitment was arguably a

¹⁵² "Bush on NATO: Russia is not our enemy", *The Washington Post*, 2 April 2008.

¹⁵³ Russian officials say that Putin sees NATO expansion as a threat to vital Russian interests, and views confrontation with Georgia as preliminary to an even more intense campaign to persuade Ukraine to drop its NATO membership bid. Crisis Group interviews, Moscow, April 2008.

¹⁵⁴ The "two" were the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic; the "four" were the Soviet Union, France, the UK and the U.S.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group observation and interviews, Russian foreign ministry officials, NATO Rose-Roth Seminars in Sochi and Tbilisi, 2006-2007.

¹⁵⁶ Especially in Russian power circles, Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Moscow, September 2007. Crisis Group observation and interviews, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Rose-Roth Seminar, Sochi, June 2006.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, international expert, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹⁵⁸ A Russian foreign ministry official at a NATO Rose-Roth Seminar in Tbilisi, April 2007.

¹⁵⁹ See "Summary Protocol", 5 January 2008 plebiscite, Central Election Commission of Georgia, 15 January 2008.

¹⁶⁰ NATO devised MAP in 1999 to provide advice and assistance to countries seeking membership.

¹⁶¹ "Russia Warns Against Georgia NATO Membership", Reuters, 11 March 2008.

¹⁶² "Top Russian Diplomat Warns Tbilisi Against NATO Membership", *Civil Georgia*, 17 March 2008.

¹⁶³ Saakashvili interview transcript, op. cit.

¹⁶⁴ Germany is Russia's biggest single trading partner, with \$52.8 billion in bilateral trade in 2007. German companies invested \$3.4 billion in Russia that year and have major energy sector commitments, www.france24.com/en/20080508-russia-expels-us-military-attaches-usa-russia?q=node/714490.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, London, April 2008, and NATO official, Brussels, May 2008.

¹⁶⁶ The comment was made at a gathering of leaders of the German armed forces on 10 March 2008 in Berlin, in the presence of NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

¹⁶⁷ "France Won't Back Ukraine and Georgia NATO Bids", Reuters, 1 April 2008.

¹⁶⁸ NATO Bucharest Summit Declaration, Article 23, 3 April, 2008.

stronger political message than inclusion in MAP would have been. Moreover, the summit declaration added that a first assessment of the MAP applications would be made in December 2008.

Though some Georgian opposition figures were disappointed NATO did not clearly condition membership on further democratic progress,¹⁶⁹ the reaction in Tbilisi was emotional and overwhelmingly positive. President Saakashvili heralded the result as “a direct commitment by NATO that Georgia and Ukraine will become members of the alliance....I am sure that we will become a NATO member before my presidential term expires”.¹⁷⁰

Moscow’s reaction was very different. “A powerful military bloc appearing near our borders will be perceived in Russia as a direct threat to the security of our country”, Putin said.¹⁷¹ According to a Western diplomat, Putin had been briefed before he went to Bucharest that MAP would not be granted, and the subsequent political commitment on membership came as a humiliating surprise when he was shown the final declaration after arriving for the NATO-Russia Council.¹⁷² At least partially as a result, there was no joint communiqué from the NATO-Russia Council session on 4 April. Instead a senior Russian diplomat told journalists that “starting yesterday evening, the context of Russia-NATO meetings had changed”, and there would be no “business as usual”.¹⁷³

By its own admission, Russia’s subsequent steps vis-à-vis Georgia are a reaction to Bucharest developments and a warning to the West. According to Foreign Minister Lavrov, “Moscow is counting on the fact that Georgia and those who are drawing her into NATO will come to the appropriate conclusions as a result of those steps that Russia has recently taken in the region”.¹⁷⁴ Russia has been clear and consistent on its disagreement with NATO expansion.¹⁷⁵ Putin allegedly even warned Bush during a closed gathering

of the leaders in Bucharest that Ukraine could cease to exist if it tried to join the alliance.¹⁷⁶

For Tbilisi, Russia’s post-Bucharest moves argue for an early NATO offer of MAP to show Moscow it cannot scare the alliance off its commitment to Georgia. A fast track process for Georgia (and Ukraine), however, would likely confirm Russia’s fortress mentality and increase confrontation. While continuing to make its own strategic choices with respect to candidate countries, the alliance would be prudent to take careful account of Russia’s threat perceptions. Existing mechanisms, such as the NATO-Russia Council, should be used more effectively, and clear and open discussions held to show Russia that its legitimate security concerns are being considered. Surprises such as the Bucharest declaration’s membership commitments should be avoided.

B. KOSOVO FALLOUT

Kosovo independence is Russia’s second greatest grievance.¹⁷⁷ It has repeatedly said that the territory’s “unlawful” independence will “undermine the basics of security in Europe” and set a precedent for other secessionist conflicts.¹⁷⁸ Putin’s hostility to secession is likely deepened by a belief that Russia is highly vulnerable to centrifugal forces. Recognition of the right of a compact minority to secession based on gross violations of human rights is, accordingly, a dangerous principle, one against which Moscow has been struggling in Chechnya. It could offer a disruptive example to other parts of the federation as well, from the North Caucasus to Tatarstan and beyond.

On the eve of Kosovo’s declaration of independence, Moscow said Western recognition “will doubtlessly be taken into account in [Russia’s] relations with

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, expert, Tbilisi, April 2008.

¹⁷⁰ “Saakashvili hails ‘historic’ NATO summit results”, Civil Georgia, 3 April 2008.

¹⁷¹ “NATO: Putin is Congenial as He Strives to Keep the Atlantic Alliance at Bay”, EurasiaNet, 4 April 2008.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Brussels, May 2008.

¹⁷³ “Владимир Путин сказал как отрезал” [“Vladimir Putin snaps back”], *Kommersant*, 5 April 2008.

¹⁷⁴ Echo Moskvi radio station, 3 April 2008, www.echo.msk.ru/news/511771-echo.html.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, experts and officials, Moscow, September 2007 and May 2008.

¹⁷⁶ “You understand, George, that Ukraine isn’t even a state. What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is Eastern Europe, and part of it, a significant part, was given by us!” in “Блок НАТО разошелся на блокпакеты”, *Kommersant*, 7 April 2004. The independent Russian paper said the quote came from a NATO source. The implicit threat presumably referred to Ukraine’s sharp demographic and political east-west divide rather than Russian military action. Foreign Minister Lavrov later said Putin’s words were misconstrued. See, “Lavrov rejects rumors of Putin’s threats against Ukraine”, *RIA Novosti*, 15 April 2008.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, experts and officials, Moscow, May 2008.

¹⁷⁸ Foreign Minister Lavrov said, “it would inevitably result in a chain reaction in many parts of the world, including Europe and elsewhere”, “Kosovo: To recognise or not to recognise?”, BBC News, 18 February 2008.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia".¹⁷⁹ Shortly thereafter, de facto authorities in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali called on the international community to recognise their independence, citing Kosovo as a precedent. The U.S. and EU positions have been unanimously supportive of Georgia's territorial integrity and dismissive of the precedent argument,¹⁸⁰ but Moscow continues to play on the issue. It upgraded ties with the de facto authorities as part of its asymmetric response to recognition of Kosovo by some 42 states¹⁸¹ and calls U.S. and EU actions, taken without explicit UN Security Council endorsement, a violation of international law and an insult to Russia's status as a permanent member of the Council.¹⁸²

Abkhazia itself argues that it has more right to be internationally recognised than Kosovo because it has stronger historical claims and has also established effective state institutions, armed forces which control its territory and a legal framework that provide for rule of law and respect of human rights. "We do not want for Moscow to recognise us to spite the U.S., to take revenge for the recognition of Kosovo", its de facto president said. "We want independence because it is our right. We have earned it. We used to be an independent state".¹⁸³ The Abkhaz are proud to have accomplished internally what they have on their own, without the heavy international supervision of Kosovo,¹⁸⁴ and many feel their efforts to integrate the ethnic Georgian Gali returnees are superior to Pristina's with respect to Kosovo's Serbs.¹⁸⁵ But at least 200,000 ethnic Georgians remain displaced because

of Sukhumi's unwillingness to accept returns in other parts of Abkhazia.¹⁸⁶

C. SPLITS WITHIN THE EU

Beneath the carefully maintained façade of its common statements, the EU is seriously divided, and the implications are felt in other multilateral bodies, including NATO, the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Only some member states are willing to criticise Russia openly and strongly for its Georgia policies. Generally speaking, these are the newest, those from Central Europe and the Baltic States, which tend to have an almost reflexive distrust of Moscow, as well as a strong desire to prove their reliability to the U.S.¹⁸⁷ Russia's main European trading partners, especially Germany and Italy,¹⁸⁸ are considerably more cautious.

In late April 2008, Lithuania blocked a mandate for the European Commission to start negotiations on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia, in part because of Russia's actions in Georgia's conflict zones. It backed down on 11 May only after the EU's Slovenian Presidency agreed to include in that mandate a point on the "frozen conflicts" emphasising Georgia's territorial integrity.¹⁸⁹ Lithuania's foreign minister then accompanied his Swedish, Polish and Slovak counterparts to Georgia in a show of support for Saakashvili. When Slovenia's foreign minister, Dimitrij Rupel, went to Tbilisi as part of a group of Georgia's supporters, some European diplomats charged him with putting bilateral policy

¹⁷⁹ "Kosovo may influence Russian ties with Georgia break-away regions", *RIA Novosti*, 15 February 2008.

¹⁸⁰ Some EU member states, including Spain, have not recognised Kosovo independence due to concerns regarding their own minority regions.

¹⁸¹ The count as of 2 June 2008, according to www.kosovothanksyou.com/.

¹⁸² See on Russia's reaction to Kosovo independence, Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°47, *Kosovo's First Month*, 18 March 2008.

¹⁸³ Bagapsh interview, *El Pais*, op. cit.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz civil society and politicians, Istanbul, June 2007.

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group correspondence with international expert, May 2008. The Abkhaz still need to engage in talks with Tbilisi on returns beyond the Gali district, especially in connection with security guarantees. Tbilisi has floated ideas of international administration and an international police force for Gali. A Gali-based interlocutor said a visiting senior U.S. diplomat recently tried to gauge possible support for international supervision. Crisis Group correspondence, international expert, and interview, Gali activist, May 2008.

¹⁸⁶ Some in Abkhazia are conscious of the need to do more on return but consider that their own security requirement must be guaranteed first. Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz civil society and politicians, Istanbul, June 2007. There are also those, however, who argue for discontinuing all engagement with Georgians in order to prove that the two ethnic groups cannot live together in a common state.

¹⁸⁷ Sweden expresses similar criticism; some European diplomats attribute this in large degree to Foreign Minister Carl Bildt's excellent relationship with President Saakashvili. Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹⁸⁸ Germany, as noted above, is Russia's leading trading partner overall; Italy is third overall. Russia also provides Germany 42 per cent of its gas needs and Italy 32 per cent. M. Leonard, N. Popescu, "A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations", EU Council of Foreign Affairs, Brussels, 2008, p. 32. Berlin and Rome cooperate with Gazprom on two strategic pipelines, North Stream and South Stream, to bring more Russian gas to Western Europe.

¹⁸⁹ "Agreement on Start of Negotiations for New Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russian Federation," Slovenian Presidency press release, 11 May 2008.

ahead of EU Presidency commitments,¹⁹⁰ especially as participation in an EU troika visit a week earlier had been downgraded.¹⁹¹

President Saakashvili has called on the EU “to study, investigate and react” to Russian military incursions in Georgia and illegal movement of Russian peacekeeping forces.¹⁹² However, EU member states have been unable to agree on deploying their new incident assessment mechanism (IAM) to Georgia.¹⁹³ While discussion continues, sceptics, led by Germany, argue the Abkhaz conflict is the UN’s responsibility and are only ready to second specific expertise to UNOMIG such as satellite imagery analysts.¹⁹⁴

The EU is ready, however, to do more to support practical confidence building in Abkhazia. Its special representative (EUSR), Peter Semneby, has been steadily increasing his role, especially on confidence-building measures in partnership with the European Commission.¹⁹⁵ A package of such measures, prepared in 2007, includes technical assistance to relevant Georgian ministries, opening of EU information centres, deployment of police liaison officers, economic rehabilitation in Abkhazia and support for education programs and transportation infrastructure, for example, possible help in restoration of the railway.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, EU diplomat, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹⁹² “Saakashvili Urges EU’s Help”, Civil Georgia, 12 May 2008.

¹⁹³ Recently approved by the EU’s Political and Security Committee, the IAM was created as an ad hoc mechanism to strengthen capacity to provide independent assessment of security incidents outside EU borders. While prompted by an August 2007 incident in Georgia, it is meant to be able to deploy in response to crises anywhere and provide the EU a more reliable basis for policy formulation. Crisis Group interview, EU official, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, EU member state’s ambassador to Georgia, Tbilisi, May 2008.

¹⁹⁵ The EU, the largest donor in Abkhazia, has allocated over €30 million in Abkhazia since 1997. Under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for 2007, the European Commission is proposing a follow-up program for the Georgia-Abkhaz conflict zone of €4 million. It would have three main components: economic infrastructure, income-generation activities and shelter assistance, with civil society support an integrated part. For more on the Commission’s work in Abkhazia, see www.delgeo.ec.europa.eu/en/programmes/rehabilitation.html; and Crisis Group Report, *Abkhazia: Ways Forward*, op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group email communication, EUSR staff, Brussels, May 2008.

Implementation has been slow, since obtaining agreement from all EU member states, dealing with challenges from Georgia and the Abkhaz de facto officials and satisfying Commission technical procedures are all time consuming. One police liaison officer to UNOMIG was deployed in late 2007 to work on both sides of the conflict zone,¹⁹⁷ but the information centre for Sukhumi is expected to open only at the end of 2008. Recent political developments have also affected political willingness from the sides to move forward.

To be more effective the EU needs to achieve greater unity in its dealings with Moscow. It should deepen its political involvement in Georgia’s conflicts and push for change of the negotiations format to include EU presence.¹⁹⁸ A visit by the EU High Representative, Javier Solana, to Tbilisi and Sukhumi on 5-6 June is an opportunity to demonstrate unity, encourage all sides to resume negotiations and begin considering format change.¹⁹⁹

A divided EU position is not in Georgia’s best interest. Even a joint stance that is less tough on certain points could well have more impact than a strong statement by less than the full organisation. While Georgia would like stronger criticism of Russian policies, it needs to bear in mind practical limitations. EU peacekeeping and civilian police capacities are stretched; even if Brussels pushes, as it should, for a much needed change of negotiations and peacekeeping formats, its capacity to deploy forces which would provide real security guarantees is limited.²⁰⁰ Although the U.S. and several European states have paid unusual attention to Tbilisi since the 2003 Rose Revolution,²⁰¹ there is strong Georgia fatigue.²⁰² The Saakashvili government would be imprudent to try and push the West to make a geo-political choice between Russia and Georgia.

¹⁹⁷ Similarly a EU police liaison officer was deployed with the OSCE to cover South Ossetia.

¹⁹⁸ On the negotiations format issue, see below and Crisis Group Reports, *Sliding towards Authoritarianism?*, pp. 10-11; *Georgia’s South Ossetia Conflict*, pp. 9-12; and *Abkhazia: Ways Forward*, pp. 1-6. All reports are op. cit.

¹⁹⁹ It would be useful for Solana also to visit Moscow to discuss formats.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior diplomat, Tbilisi, May 2008.

²⁰¹ Polish President Lech Kaczynski visited Georgia four times in just over a year.

²⁰² Crisis Group interview, high level diplomat, Tbilisi, May 2008.

V. TBILISI'S CONFLICT RESOLUTION POLICIES

Georgia does not view Russia as neutral in the Abkhaz and Ossetian conflicts²⁰³ and has repeatedly tried and failed to change its status in the negotiations and peacekeeping operations. At the same time, it insufficiently appreciates that Sukhumi and Tskhinvali view Moscow as their main security guarantor. The entities have little confidence in Tbilisi, the EU or the U.S. and seek recognition before accepting demilitarisation, neutrality and a downgrading of the Russian peacekeeping presence.²⁰⁴

Tbilisi wants to curtail Russia's role in peacekeeping and diplomacy and increase the EU's.²⁰⁵ It stresses the need for direct Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations, with the UN, EU and Russia as participants,²⁰⁶ though it is increasingly frustrated with the UN, blaming it for being too reticent to criticise Moscow.²⁰⁷ Since at least 2006, it has portrayed Russia as a direct conflict participant, incapable of unbiased peacekeeping and mediation, and it has been increasingly successful in encouraging its Western friends to question Russia's neutral role.²⁰⁸ However, it is far from getting all EU

²⁰³ Tbilisi considers Russian peacekeepers on its territory a threat and says they have failed in their mandate. For background on this and Georgia's efforts to change that situation, see Crisis Group Reports, *Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict*, op. cit., pp. 12-18; and *Sliding towards Authoritarianism?*, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

²⁰⁴ Bagapsh interview, *El Pais*, op. cit.

²⁰⁵ In South Ossetia, it wishes also to reflect "the new realities" on the ground. On the emergence there of an alternative pro-Tbilisi actor, Dmitri Sanakoev, see Crisis Group Report, *Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict*, op. cit. Tbilisi has encouraged the international community to take account of the "new realities" and talk with the Kurta-based Sanakoev, as well as the Tbilisi-backed ethnic Georgian Abkhaz government-in-exile in Upper Kodori. Neither represents the break-away communities in any way, however; they are mainly representative of local ethnic Georgians.

²⁰⁶ The peace process has been stalled since 2006. The Abkhaz condition resumption mainly on demilitarisation of Kodori and observance of previously reached agreements.

²⁰⁷ After UNOMIG concluded Russia was responsible for shooting down the Georgian drone in April 2008, both the Georgian and Abkhaz sides questioned the UN-led process. The Abkhaz de facto foreign minister, Shamba, said Sukhumi might consider pulling out of the negotiations; Tbilisi's negotiator, Yakobashvili, responded: "This format has died long ago, and now it is time to bury it", "Time to Bury the UN-Led Format – Georgian Minister", *Civil Georgia*, 27 May 2008.

²⁰⁸ The OSCE chairman in office, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, said recently in relation to South Ossetia

member states and the U.S. to work together to push the UN Secretary-General and Security Council for a change in the negotiations and peacekeeping formats.²⁰⁹ As long as Georgia considers the negotiations and peacekeeping mechanisms unfair, it is unlikely to engage with them in earnest. It should nevertheless unconditionally return to the negotiating table and from there attempt to modify the format.

The EU should decide whether it is ready to contribute a civilian police presence beyond the liaison officers currently stationed with UNOMIG (for Abkhazia) and the OSCE (for South Ossetia). Meanwhile, all sides should use the existing mechanisms to return to the table and then negotiate their step-by-step modification. The international community should urge Moscow to accept the need for change and Tbilisi not to undermine the mechanisms but show patience until new terms are agreed.²¹⁰

A. SAAKASHVILI'S ABKHAZIA INITIATIVE

On 28 March 2008, President Saakashvili unveiled a new initiative for resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Talking to an audience of Georgian and international conflict transformation experts, he asserted that "Georgia's disintegration" was impossible, then offered the Abkhaz "unlimited autonomy, wide federalism and very serious representation in the central governmental bodies of Georgia", all with international guarantees.²¹¹ Specifically he proposed for the Abkhaz a new post of vice president; the right to veto laws related to the constitutional status of Abkhazia and the preservation of Abkhaz culture, language and ethnicity; establishment of a jointly controlled free economic zone adjacent to the ceasefire line; gradual merger of Abkhaz and Georgian law enforcement and customs; and, among the autonomy guarantees, that

that it was time to look into possibilities for a new negotiating format. "OSCE Chair: S. Ossetian Negotiating Format Not Conducive to Conflict Resolution", *Caucasus Press*, Tbilisi, 30 May 2008.

²⁰⁹ With respect to South Ossetia, Georgia would like to change the quadrilateral Joint Control Commission (Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia and North Ossetia) to a two+two+two format that would include Tbilisi and the Tbilisi-backed Sanakoev administration in Kurta in the zone of conflict; Tskhinvali and Moscow; and the OSCE and EU. But such changes could unravel the 1992 Sochi agreement. If the motivation is to isolate Tskhinvali by promoting the "new reality" of Sanakoev, the initiative has minimal chance.

²¹⁰ Even implementing co-location of one EU officer for each conflict zone took months.

²¹¹ "Georgia Offers New Peace Plan for Abkhazia", Update Service of the Government of Georgia, 28 March 2008, p. 1.

Russia could help mediate conflict resolution issues.²¹²

Saakashvili's proposal probably went as far as it was possible for him to go and may be a hard sell domestically. Minister for Reintegration Yakobashvili called the initiative an historic opportunity,²¹³ but critics argue the president should have offered more concrete details.²¹⁴ The Abkhaz have distrusted Tbilisi's autonomy ideas from the start of the conflict,²¹⁵ and the limitations on implementation of the scheme provided to Ajara and on national minority participation in Georgia's public life are not encouraging examples.²¹⁶

When UNOMIG delivered the proposal to them, the Abkhaz de facto leaders refused to receive it.²¹⁷ They, as well as local civil society activists, consider it a public relations stunt staged for the West's benefit. "Saakashvili's proposal on unlimited autonomy is a part of propaganda ahead of the NATO summit in Bucharest....Saakashvili's proposals are unacceptable for us and we reject them", Bagapsh said.²¹⁸ It is difficult for Sukhumi to engage with a new initiative, when the peace process has been suspended since the 2006 Georgian special operation in the Kodori Valley. Even the formerly active track two dialogue initiatives have dwindled, as many Georgian officials have called them a waste of time and stopped participating. Without greater mutual confidence, the peace process has few chances to move forward. To advance it, Tbi-

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Temuri Yakobashvili during the seminar on conflict resolution, attended by Crisis Group, at which the initiative was unveiled, 28-29 March 2008.

²¹⁴ Saakashvili has reportedly tasked his cabinet to elaborate the plan. "Saakashvili tells Ministers: Work on Abkhaz Peace Plan", Civil Georgia, 12 April 2008. Critics also say autonomy and federalism are not new, having been offered in Shevardnadze's presidency, and are unrealistic in the current environment. Discussion, 28-29 March 2008, seminar at which the initiative was unveiled.

²¹⁵ The Abkhaz (and South Ossetians) scoff especially at the concept of "cultural autonomy", which was pushed in the Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze eras. They regard Tbilisi as too Georgian-centric and nationalistic to make it work.

²¹⁶ On Ajara, see Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°34, *Saakashvili's Ajara Success: Repeatable Elsewhere in Georgia?*, 18 August 2004. Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, which have substantial Armenian and Azerbaijani populations respectively, are cases in point for inadequate of national minority participation in public life. See Crisis Group Report N°178, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, 22 November 2006.

²¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tbilisi, April 2008.

²¹⁸ "Head of Abkhazia Refers to Georgia's new offer as Propaganda on the Eve of NATO Summit", (in Russian), Interfax, 29 March 2008.

lisi should focus on practical steps without linking them to status. It has been conditioning confidence building on resolution of status questions, but this could be changing. In May two senior officials told Crisis Group for the first time that the process could begin with practical steps separated from status.²¹⁹ Officials have also slowly started to reach out to international NGOs involved in peacebuilding, of whose activities they had been severely critical over the past two years. Communicating the new approach clearly to the Abkhaz will be important.

Several confidence-building steps in Saakashvili's March initiative coincide with the "Key to the Future" plan the Abkhaz proposed in 2006. Both sides have expressed interest in cooperating on combating crime and on economic areas.²²⁰ Aspects of the Georgian initiative, as well as the general line described by Yakobashvili's ministry with regard to promoting people-to-people contacts and practical economic links, suggest new willingness in Tbilisi to allow the Abkhaz to diversify their links beyond Russia. The question remains whether deeds will follow words.

Re-building trust will take years. Many in Tbilisi feel that the confidence building Western organisations have been promoting for well over a decade has not worked and has furthered separatism. But those attempts to bring Abkhaz and Georgians together have been blocked by obstacles to freedom of movement, communication and trade, as well as Tbilisi's haste to resolve the conflicts. Senior diplomats who have been involved in the negotiations acknowledge that some of Tbilisi's policies, especially the interior ministry activities in the conflict zones discussed below, have been at cross purposes to confidence building. The government should pursue consistent policies aiming for incremental progress over several years before re-opening the status question.

After Saakashvili's March initiative and as tensions rose, the sides exchanged notes proposing different sets of issues for discussion.²²¹ The Abkhaz focused on removal of armed forces from Upper Kodori; a signed, internationally guaranteed agreement on non-resumption of hostilities; the sanctions regime; and opening of direct sea connections between Sukhumi and Trabzon, as well as a possible road link between

²¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, senior Georgian official, Tbilisi, and senior Georgian diplomat, New York, both May 2008.

²²⁰ "The Proposal of the Abkhaz Side on the Comprehensive Settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict, 'Key to the Future'", May 2006. The merger of law-enforcement agencies on both sides is a non-starter for the Abkhaz.

²²¹ Crisis Group interview, senior diplomat, Tbilisi, May 2008.

Abkhazia and Turkey through Georgia.²²² The Georgians raised Saakashvili's initiative; stabilisation of the security zone and the restricted weapons zone; capacity building and economic development, including a working group to realise a free economic zone in Ochamchira and Gali regions; establishment of a joint youth camp in the security zone; return of refugees and IDPs; and protection of human rights in the zone of conflict.

Sukhumi judged the ambitious Georgian response counter-productive at a time of crisis with no peace talks.²²³ The notion of a 600-youth camp in the ceasefire-line village of Ganmukhuri or Upper Kodori seemed particularly offensive.²²⁴ A suggestion to increase law enforcement personnel from 600 to 2,000 on both sides of the ceasefire line also was problematic.²²⁵ Further, the Georgians proposed to sign bilateral protocols on the package, while the Abkhaz wanted to respect the negotiations format that envisages the UN and Russia as co-signatories of agreements.

On 12 May 2008, Tbilisi's former chief negotiator and current UN ambassador, Irakli Alasania, went to Sukhumi for the first direct talks since 2007.²²⁶ Tbilisi said he presented the details of Saakashvili's initiative, while a source close to him said he "went to save a catastrophic situation".²²⁷ Alasania is perhaps the only official Georgian interlocutor the Abkhaz consider credible. Negotiation channels suffered a severe

blow when he moved to the UN in 2006.²²⁸ Emphasising the need for confidence building and IDP return, he said his trip opened some opportunities and began dialogue on the security incidents in the conflict zone.²²⁹ One issue discussed was the possibility of returning to a document on security guarantees and IDP returns initialled but not signed in December 2005. However, the Abkhaz de facto foreign minister felt it would be better to hold a serious discussion after the 21 May Georgian elections.²³⁰

On 15 May, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution recognising the right of return to Abkhazia of refugees and IDPs, but only by the unusual vote of fourteen in favour, eleven opposed, 105 abstaining.²³¹ It stressed the need for rapid development of a returns timetable and called on member states to deter persons under their jurisdiction from obtaining property in Abkhazia. It was a qualified success for Tbilisi's effort to prevent extra-legal Russian investments in Abkhazia and to draw attention to what Saakashvili has called "the biggest ethnic cleansing of the twentieth century".²³² Over the past two years, Georgia has increased diplomatic moves to have wartime developments in Abkhazia recognised as ethnic cleansing (mainly of Georgians but also other groups), in order to deflect Abkhaz attempts to claim a right to secession based on massive human rights violations against them (as in Kosovo).

In practice, Tbilisi has had an inconsistent stance on IDP return. Some 45,000-65,000 Georgians have gone back to the Abkhaz-controlled Gali district, but Tbilisi argues this is not a dignified, secure and well-organised process.²³³ In fact, as detailed below, both

²²² Crisis Group correspondence, expert, May 2008.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Both are Tbilisi-controlled areas that the Abkhaz side perceives as a possible source of a security threat. A "Patriotic Youth Camp" was unilaterally established in Ganmukhuri in May 2007 and has been a source of assertive Georgian propaganda. Its presence has increased tensions in the area. In his report to the Security Council on 23 July 2007, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, "in order to reduce the possibility of incidents, the United Nations joins the Group of Friends in calling on the Government of Georgia to move the camp away from the security zone". In this context, President Saakashvili said on 6 September that Georgia did not need "amoral and meagre recommendations" of international organisations, in particular the UN.

²²⁵ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tbilisi, May 2008.

²²⁶ In October 2007, then Minister for Conflict Resolution Bakradze visited Sukhumi mainly in regard to several Abkhaz servicemen detained by the Georgians in the Kodori area. The Abkhaz were quick to emphasise that neither meeting constituted a resumption of the peace process.

²²⁷ Crisis Group correspondence, former high-ranking Georgian official, May 2008. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew J. Bryza visited Sukhumi just days before Alasania's visit and said he tried to rejuvenate a real peace process. "Abkhazia: Rumours of Peace Amidst Drums of War", RFE/RL, 23 May 2008.

²²⁸ In October 2004, Alasania became the chairman of the Tbilisi-based Abkhazian government-in-exile; in February 2005 he was named the Georgian president's special envoy for Abkhazia issues.

²²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Georgian UN ambassador, New York, May 2008.

²³⁰ Crisis Group correspondence, expert, May 2008.

²³¹ In favour: Albania, Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Ukraine, U.S.; against: Armenia, Belarus, North Korea, India, Iran, Myanmar, Russia, Serbia, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela. Among the abstentions were the three Western European members of the Group of Friends, the UK, Germany and France. The General Assembly was used to pass this resolution in expectation that Russia would use its veto power to block it in the Security Council.

²³² "The President of Georgia Met the Experts and the NGO Representatives", president's office, press release, 28 March 2008.

²³³ The Abkhaz are ready to fully promote returns to the Gali district; Tbilisi wants returns to the whole of Abkhazia.

sides are to blame for Gali's inadequate security situation. They disagree on the returnees' political status,²³⁴ and Tbilisi refuses to accept that a true return process has actually started. Fearing Moscow would claim high numbers as a peacekeeping success, Tbilisi has also blocked attempts by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to conduct a verification exercise to establish those numbers, which could stimulate further, more comprehensive humanitarian aid²³⁵ and movement in the political negotiations.

Tbilisi needs to understand that in a context of no mutual confidence, it is better to reopen contacts without formalising outcomes than to lose the opportunity to restart a dialogue. Its broad agenda is meant to ensure discussion of Saakashvili's initiative,²³⁶ but haste on substance for which one side is unready will not be productive.

B. WORDS AND DEEDS

Although Saakashvili's government claims to be committed to a peaceful resolution of the Abkhaz conflict based on the president's March initiative, in practice some authorities are trying to squeeze the breakaway regions into submission,²³⁷ using threats and harassment.²³⁸ The interior ministry is particularly active in this, but other agencies have also been impeding confidence building.²³⁹ This is especially evi-

dent in the Gali district, where 45,000-65,000 ethnic Georgians have returned but are subjected to human rights abuse from both sides. Sukhumi, which administers the area, needs to significantly improve its human rights record, but Gali dwellers also report increased harassment over the past two years by Tbilisi's interior ministry and the pro-Tbilisi Abkhaz authorities-in-exile.²⁴⁰

Gali civil society activists described to Crisis Group intimidation by Georgian security services, phone taps and threats. Viewed as traitors for returning and cooperating with the Abkhaz, they are told: "If you are patriots, you will need to help us to undermine the Abkhaz. If you fail to do that, you have betrayed us to the Abkhaz and to Russia".²⁴¹ Several persons said they were threatened with "being disappeared", a fate others have experienced. An activist said that threats aimed at preventing the Gali residents' participation in the de facto Abkhaz election are especially severe. A teacher was told by Georgian interior ministry personnel that both her legs would be broken if she went to the poll.²⁴² Often the Abkhaz also harass and threaten returnees.

Two high-profile cases caused particular concern shortly before local de facto elections in Abkhazia. On 5 December 2006, representatives of the Fast Reaction Military Unit of Georgia's interior ministry arrested Fridon Chakaberia, an influential ethnic Georgian who headed the pro-Abkhaz de facto administration of a village in Gali, as he crossed to Georgian-controlled territory and charged him with drug possession. Chakaberia denied the accusation, claiming the police planted the drugs. According to the UN Human Rights Office, his rights were violated during detention, investigation and trial.²⁴³ He was sentenced to ten years in prison but freed on appeal. The case caused an uproar in the Georgian human rights community. A diplomat with a human rights portfolio said, "we know this is politically motivated,

²³⁴ Sukhumi considers them citizens of Abkhazia and has started distributing de facto ID documents, a fact resented in Tbilisi. Accounts vary widely as to whether the participation of Georgian returnees in Abkhazia's political life is forced. The returnees are caught between the two sides, with each trying to manipulate them to its own political benefit.

²³⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Georgian official, May 2008.

²³⁶ Crisis Group interview, expert, Tbilisi, May 2008.

²³⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior diplomat, Tbilisi, April 2008.

²³⁸ Several Gali interlocutors described harassment by Georgian security services. Gali residents say phone taps are common, intimidations frequent. Civil society actors have described pressure by security services who make it understood they know the details of activities, movements and family circumstance and hint at family problems if there is no cooperation.

²³⁹ In the Georgian-Ossetian zone of conflict, interior ministry checkpoints frequently prevent free movement of people and goods. Tight controls are justified as anti-smuggling and anti-contraband measures. But the harassment targets individuals not engaged in major economic activity. Elderly women taking apples to a local market or villagers carrying bread have been harassed. Ethnic Ossetians returning from shopping at a wholesale market near Tbilisi have also been targeted. Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tbilisi, May 2008. Georgian interior ministry personnel prevented a Georgian

ambulance from entering the conflict zone to assist an Ossetian patient in need of urgent surgery. Crisis Group interview, Ossetian source, Tbilisi, May 2008.

²⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Gali returnees, Gali and Tbilisi, 2007-2008. The Abkhaz government-in-exile is staffed by Georgian IDPs, often officials from the Soviet-era federative Abkhazia, and deals with issues of displaced persons. For more on it, see Crisis Group Report, *Abkhazia Today*, op. cit., p. 21.

²⁴¹ Crisis Group correspondence, expert on Gali district, May 2008.

²⁴² Crisis Group interview, Gali activist, Tbilisi, May 2008.

²⁴³ HROAG monthly report, April 2007.

but of course we cannot prove they planted the drugs on him”.²⁴⁴

David Sigua, chairman of the de facto electoral commission of the Gali district, has been missing since he was kidnapped from his house on 3 February 2007. The Georgian government claims he was abducted by the Abkhaz de facto authorities; Sukhumi blames Georgian security services. A source with contacts in Georgian power structures says the kidnappers misunderstood the interior ministry's orders, and Sigua was killed shortly after his detention.²⁴⁵

The Abkhaz de facto authorities insisted that Chakaberia's arrest was politically motivated, aimed “at intimidating the local population” and linked both incidents with the local elections. “All Georgians who live and work in Abkhazia are considered to be enemies in Georgia, so Tbilisi tries to punish those residents of Gali district who have real aspirations for a peaceful life”, Bagapsh said.²⁴⁶

Samegrelo, the region adjacent to Gali on the Georgian side of the ceasefire line from where a lot of this harassment originates, a senior Georgian official admitted, is characterised by “lawlessness” of which Saakashvili may not be fully aware.²⁴⁷ The official and others claimed the Akhalaia clan controls it. The regional prosecutor is Roland Akhalaia; one of his sons heads the justice ministry's penitentiary system; the other led the interior ministry's Department for Constitutional Security (DSC)²⁴⁸ until March 2006, when he officially left it after being linked to a high-profile murder.²⁴⁹ Persons tied to the ministry and the penitentiary system, however, said in actuality he continues to run that institution. Diplomats close to the peace process expressed deep concern over DSC activities in the conflict regions, criticising it for much of the heavy-handed interference in Gali, including intimidation of local inhabitants

Georgian media also stirs up conflict. As Russia increased its peacekeeping contingent in Abkhazia, a

number of outlets reported increased attacks against civilians in Gali. The pro-government TV channel Rustavi 2 asserted that Georgians there were subjected to increased pressure, physical assaults and even rape by Abkhaz forces, though a Gali activist said the reports were fabricated,²⁵⁰ and a diplomat with a human rights portfolio which includes the area denounced them as unfounded.²⁵¹ Locals denounced as inaccurate Georgian media reports of an attack by the Abkhaz on 21 May against two buses carrying Gali voters.²⁵²

Already in January 2008, the UN Secretary-General concluded that “inaccurate reports originating in the Georgian media and, occasionally, by the Georgian authorities ... have contributed to growing distrust and insecurity, ultimately increasing the chances of confrontation...fanning fears and hostility through misrepresentation will only entrench it further, and make harder the restoration of confidence that is a stated objective of the sides”.²⁵³ Dissemination of full and accurate information is essential to confidence building. The Georgian press should be encouraged to report more accurately and politicians to cite information that is verified and not based on rumour.

Interlocutors in Sukhumi have told Crisis Group that Tbilisi's approach to them is offensive and nationalistic.²⁵⁴ President Saakashvili, for example, has referred to the de facto authorities in Abkhazia as “bandits”, “illegal gang-formations” and even “the hyenas ensconced in the government buildings”.²⁵⁵ Such language does nothing to reestablish the confidence necessary for productive negotiations. Tbilisi should moderate its rhetoric and sign an agreement on the non-resumption of hostilities. To truly change attitudes and beliefs, however, initiatives for reconciliation and transitional justice are also essential. Assuming a share of responsibility is unpopular among most Georgians, who view themselves as victims of Russian aggression, but their government might transform the conflict environment if it issued a statement regretting past injustice.

²⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tbilisi, spring 2007.

²⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, 2007-2008.

²⁴⁶ “Sokhumi Sets Ultimatum as Police Arrest Abkhaz Official”, *Civil Georgia*, 8 December 2008.

²⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Georgian official, February 2008.

²⁴⁸ The DSC, according to the interior ministry website, is “an independent militarised structural department of Georgia's Interior Ministry”. It is authorised to use special services methods to protect Georgia's constitutional framework and economy.

²⁴⁹ The murder case was that of Sandro Girgvliani; see Crisis Group Report, *Sliding towards Authoritarianism?*, op. cit., p. 23.

²⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Gali activist, Tbilisi, May 2008.

²⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Tbilisi, May 2008.

²⁵² Crisis Group interview, Gali activist, Tbilisi, May 2008.

²⁵³ “Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Abkhazia, Georgia”, UNSC S/2008/38, 23 January 2008.

²⁵⁴ Crisis Group observation based on interviews in Abkhazia and South Ossetia over several years.

²⁵⁵ “President Saakashvili Opens New Road in Upper Abkhazia”, 29 September 2007; and “The President of Georgia Met Refugees and the Veterans of the War of the 90s”, 26 February 2008, at www.president.gov.ge.

VI. CONCLUSION

The April 2008 escalation brought Georgia and Russia closer to war than ever before, the direct result of confrontational policies in Moscow, Tbilisi and Sukhumi alike. Each of the three parties needs to reflect on the risks and uncertainties of a deadly conflict if they do not change course.

The Georgian government has succeeded in demonstrating that Russia is playing an unconstructive role in the frozen conflict with Abkhazia (as well as with South Ossetia), but there are limits to that success. It has already benefited from strongly worded Western statements, but these cannot produce a breakthrough in the conflicts or change the realities of geography which make Russia a large neighbour with interests that will not disappear. Russia does have honestly-felt concerns about its border with Georgia, especially in advance of the 2014 Sochi Olympics, and understandably wants to be better informed about possible NATO expansion to the area.

The U.S. and EU need to be firm in their responses to Moscow's manoeuvres over Georgia's breakaway regions, but there is too great a tendency to make strong statements critical of Russia without taking the time either to hear its side or to secure their own unity. If they genuinely seek strategic partnerships, they need also to recognise that Russia has legitimate interests in the South Caucasus that must be taken seriously. They should also continue to caution Tbilisi against its own provocations and dalliances with a military option.

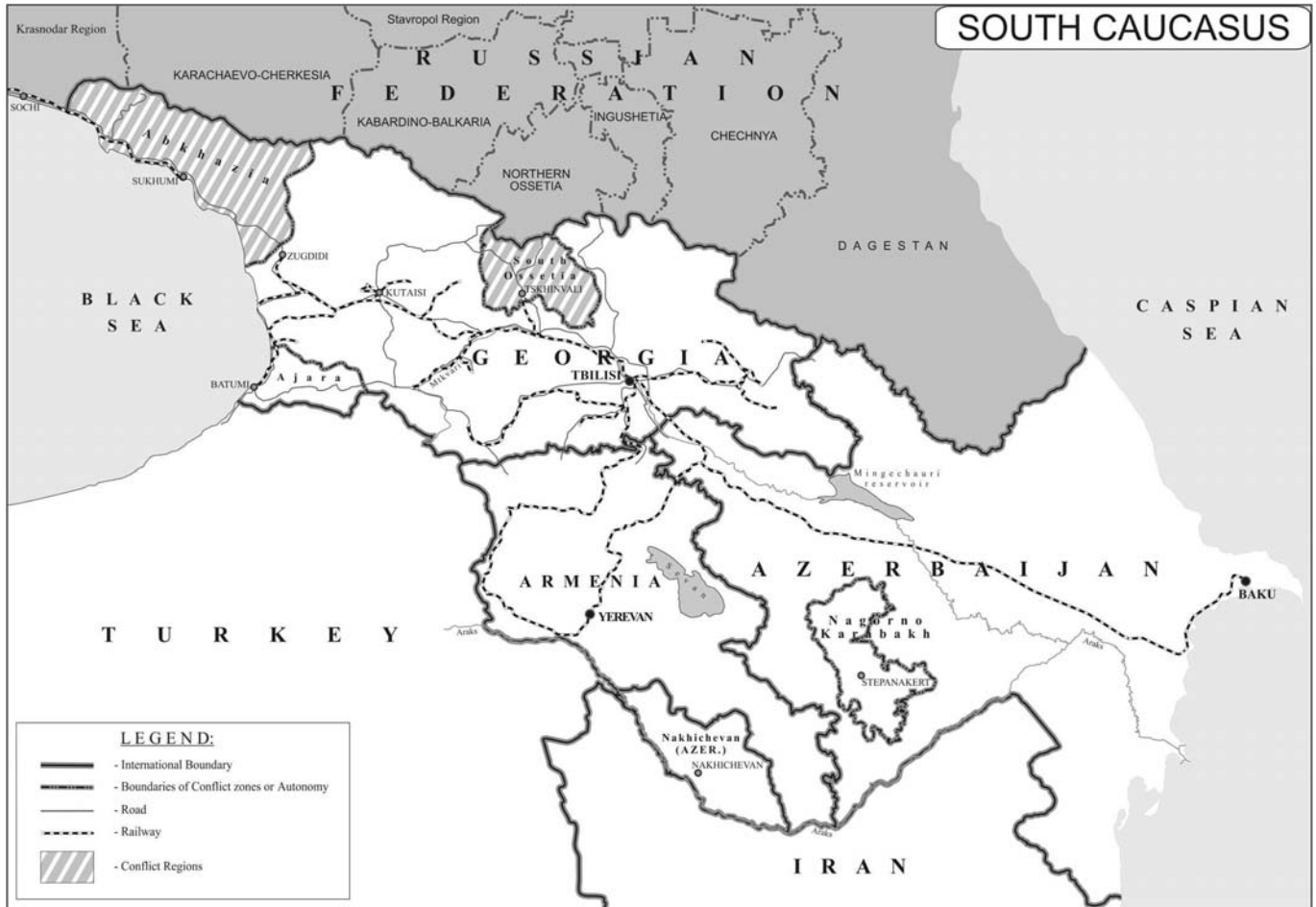
The Abkhaz have been relatively comfortable with the status quo, but this is changing as the de facto leadership comes to realise that Moscow's recognition of their independence is not in the cards and that with deeper economic integration they risk gradual absorption as a tiny minority into the giant and decidedly nationalist Russian polity. Meanwhile, to the extent the world looks in their direction, attention increasingly is on the struggle between Moscow and Tbilisi and away from the Abkhaz cause. The Georgians hope to benefit from this realisation and persuade the Abkhaz to resume genuine negotiations, but that is unlikely to happen until they drop bombast and threat from their approach.

The frozen conflict will not be resolved until all three main actors have political will for that to happen, not least until Moscow is committed to more constructive conflict resolution policies. But the state of their relations with Russia aside, there are issues on which the Georgians could engage immediately and unilaterally to prepare the ground. They should emphasise incremental confidence-building measures with the Abkhaz de facto authorities and the current population of the breakaway region so as to develop essential mutual trust and confidence. This involves fostering contacts across the conflict divide without preconditions and promoting transitional justice initiatives. The Abkhaz need to face up to their own share of justice issues, as well as allow comprehensive IDP returns once security guarantees are agreed. Without such returns – and regardless of the ultimate resolution of the status issue, Abkhazia's argument that it is a legitimate political entity will remain unconvincing.

Tbilisi/Moscow/Brussels, 5 June 2008

APPENDIX A

MAP OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS



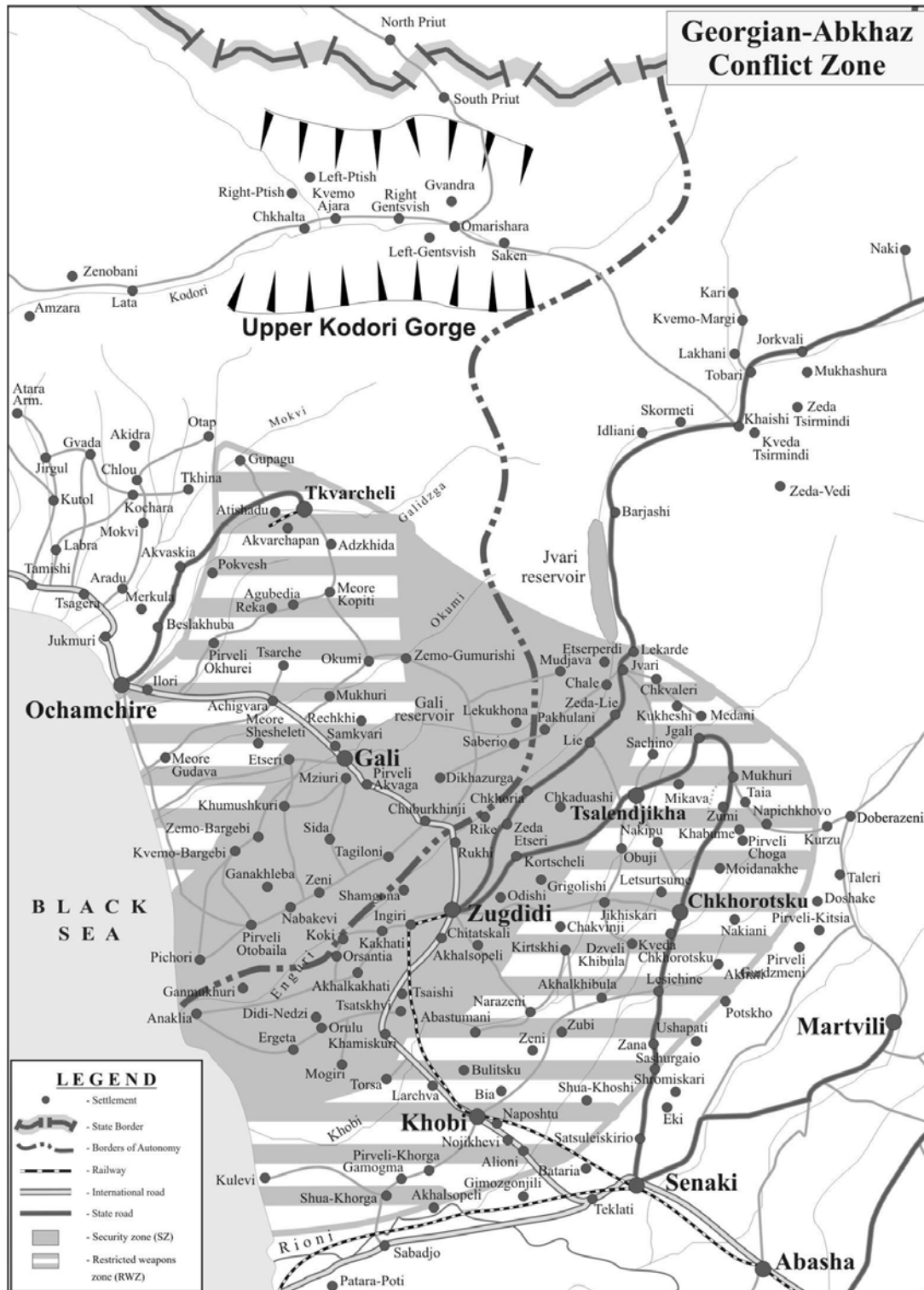
APPENDIX B

MAP OF WESTERN GEORGIA



APPENDIX C

MAP OF THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT ZONE



APPENDIX D

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