

Russian war and Georgian democracy

By Ghia Nodia,
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Russia says [1] it has started pulling back from Georgian soil, but there are few if any signs that it means business. Therefore, the war is not over yet. Despite this, Neal Ascherson [1] and Ivan Krastev [1] have on **openDemocracy** already started taking stock of the possible results of the war. I will join them in these attempts - though all of us should understand that while Russia continues trying to change the situation on the ground [2] through military means, any such assessments can only be rather tentative.

A humanitarian disaster

The loss of life - in Georgia proper and in South Ossetia - and the humanitarian catastrophe that ensued from the war are obviously the most disturbing results. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP [5]) has calculated [6] the figure of the displaced people on the Georgian side at approximately 128,000. If the Russians do pull back [7], the figure will be considerably reduced as most people will return to their homes even if they are looted and damaged. However, at least 20,000 of these Georgians come from Abkhazia and South Ossetia: their return is unthinkable unless a new security regime maintained by the international community is instituted in these breakaway territories.

Even if Russia shows the goodwill to accept such a change (and it would take enormous international pressure [8] to achieve this), this will take time. In addition, there are Georgian villages adjacent to South Ossetia fully or partially destroyed [9] under the Russian occupation, with people there having gone through hell [10]. Under the circumstances, they will be scared to return until very firm international-security guarantees are established: again, a very big if.

This means that, for the time being, Georgia [11] will have to deal with tens of thousands of recently displaced people. This is in addition to the huge numbers [12] of internally-displaced people (IDPs) left after the conflicts in the same territories in the early 1990s. This will be a heavy economic and political strain. Currently, almost all Tbilisi's school-buildings are occupied by the IDPs [13], and nobody can tell when we will be able to start classes there. As of 21 August 2008, about 42,000 were registered as occupying Georgian educational institutions (mainly schools). Naturally, this is a major concern for this author [13], who is the minister of education in this country.

Ghia Nodia is minister of education and science of the Republic of Georgia. He was appointed to this post on 31 January 2008. He is also a scholar and adviser of the Caucasus Institute of Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD [3]) in Tbilisi. His books include (with Álvaro Pinto Scholtbach) *The Political Landscape of Georgia: Political Parties: Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects* [4] (University of Chicago Press, 2007)

Also by Ghia Nodia in **openDemocracy**:

"The war for Georgia: Russia, the west, the future [4]" (12 August 2008)

Quite a few of the recent IDPs are mad at this government - whom they blame (alongside Russia, of course) for their human tragedy. These people are likely to be used as combustible material by some opposition groups in the future, and Russia - which is unlikely to give up on her ambition to destabilise Georgia internally - will try to encourage that through her proxies in Georgia proper.

For separatist authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the war was a major victory. While Ossetians mourn their dead and start rebuilding with Russian help, they - as well as the Abkhaz - rejoice at their new sense of security. This is because Russians completed for them the task of ethnic cleansing of their territories. The IDPs say that the Georgian villages within South Ossetia are almost erased; Eduard Kokoity, the Ossetian separatist leader, asked rhetorically on 15 August 2008 why the return of the Georgians should be allowed [14] "so that they can shoot (us) in the back again"; a week later he told [15] the Russian online news agency that two Georgian enclaves in South Ossetia had been "liquidated". Unless the security regime in these territories changes dramatically, this will be irreversible.

The spirit of the nation

As I argued in my previous article written for **openDemocracy** ("The war for Georgia: Russia, the west, the future [15]", 12 August 2008) - and almost all non-Russian analysts agree - this war was for the whole of Georgia, not for South Ossetia. Georgia's general direction, its project of becoming a European nation rather than Russia's satellite, was at stake. This made the moral and psychological aspect of the war no less important than the territorial one.

President Mikheil Saakashvili [16] of Georgia said that his country came out of this war as a moral victor. This is not the mere posturing of a politician whom even some observers generally sympathetic to Georgia called "hot-headed" and "irresponsible" for his conduct during the August 2008 war. The genuine theatre of war was the spirit of the Georgian nation [17] and the validity of Georgian political and economic institutions. It should not be forgotten that just a few years ago Georgia was commonly called a "failing state".

While the vast majority of the Georgian people emphatically assert their commitment to western institutions and values, we also understand that these values have not sufficiently taken root in Georgia, as old customs and attitudes based [17] in the Russian and Soviet past die hard. Georgia is an aspiring democracy, but not a consolidated one. This gave Russia hope that Georgia's ambition to become a western democracy could yet be reversed; some Georgians were not sure whether the nation would be firm enough under the Russian pressure, while still others were actually looking forward to returning to the old ways under a new Russian-installed government.

If there is a rational explanation at all for the procrastination [18] of the Russian troops - who continue widening the geographical scope of their destructive actions while their president sets and breaks new timetables for the withdrawal - it is that continuing the state of uncertainty, destruction and humiliation could still allow for the objective of regime change in Georgia. If Russia fails to achieve this objective, than it is justified to speak of Georgia's political as well as moral victory.

OpenDemocracy's Russia section [15] reports, debates and blogs the Georgia war. Its coverage includes:

Evgeny Morozov, "Russia/Georgia: war of the web [15]" (13 August 2008)

Peter Nasmyth, "From South Ossetia's children, Georgian and Ossetian [15]" (18 August 2008)

Zygmunt Dzieciolowski, "Abkhazia: wedded to independence [15]" (21 August 2008)

Boris Dolgin, "Russia: what peace looks like [15]" (22 August 2008)

The main indicators of such a victory are the sustainability of Georgian institutions and the strength of the spirit of the nation. On both these counts, and despite considerable strain, so far Georgia has stood the test. There were brief moments of panic (such as late on the night of 11 August, when a rumour spread that Russian tanks were advancing to Tbilisi); but overall, in places which were not directly occupied, life continued as usual. The banking system took only one day off, and there was no mass cash withdrawal. The Georgian currency, the *lari*, remained stable. Energy supplies were normal in all but the occupied areas, and there were no food shortages. There were no public disturbances. A group of felons escaped from one of the prisons in western Georgia, but most of them are recaptured already. Trains arrived on time - until Russia blew up the main railway-bridge. A flood of new IDPs constituted the major challenge, but all of them now have a roof over their heads and relief [19] efforts have been organised. Even under occupation, the Georgian state did not fail in its main routine functions.

A few people in Georgia would probably welcome a Russian-installed government. However, the fact is that no political group publicly voiced support for the Russian position - and most meaningful opposition [19] groups announced that they were suspending political infighting with the government. In the Georgian media, numerous people criticised the government's actions before and during the war, but not from the pro-Russian position. As is normal for any nation, it rallied around its leadership in the face of foreign aggression, while at the same time people voiced criticism of specific government actions.

Everybody understands this moral victory is yet to be consolidated and there lie serious internal challenges ahead. Many people hold the government responsible for the humanitarian disaster and territorial losses caused by the war, and as the situation calms down, the opposition may take advantage of this sentiment to attack the government. If this stays within acceptable democratic procedures [20], this will only be normal; but - given the Georgian record of successful or attempted unconstitutional changes of power - there are always fears that things can get out of hand, and Russia will try to help destabilise the situation through its Georgian proxies. But the resilience that Georgian institutions [20] have shown so far gives solid ground to believe that this scenario can be avoided

The biggest unknown: Russia

The trajectory of Georgia's development after [21] the war with Russia is not fully clear; but the future of Russian-western relations - a factor which of course has direct implications for the future of Georgia - is the biggest unknown.

The results of the Nato ministerial meeting on 19 August gave some sense of direction: the conflict brought Georgia one step closer to Nato (through establishing [22] a permanent Nato-Georgian commission) and further estranged Russia from the alliance (through suspending the activities of the Nato-Russian council). But these steps are rather miniscule in themselves and nobody can tell how far the process will go.

Among **openDemocracy's** articles on Georgian politics and the region, including the war with Russia in August 2008:

Donald Rayfield, "Georgia and Russia: with you, without you [19]" (3 October 2006)

Robert Parsons, "Russia and Georgia: a lover's revenge [19]" (6 October 2006)

Vicken Cheterian, "Georgia's arms race [19]" (4 July 2007)

Donald Rayfield, "Russia and Georgia: a war of perceptions [19]" (24 August 2007)

Alexander Rondeli, "Georgia: politics after revolution [19]" (14 November 2007)

Robert Parsons, "Mikheil Saakashvili's bitter victory [19]" (11 January 2008)

Jonathan Wheatley, "Georgia's democratic stalemate [19]" (14 April 2008)

Robert Parsons, "Georgia,

The main problem is that the west appears to be confused and divided on the Russia issue. In the context of war with Georgia, Russia could only procure the support of countries such as Cuba, Venezuela and Syria. It is logical to deduce from this, that it is close to joining the club of nations commonly called "rogue states" - those who openly defy the international consensus and create conspicuous dangers for international peace. However, western powers will find it difficult to act on this logic: the world cannot afford having a rogue state of such size and significance, so it seems better to deny the reality of the danger. The Russian government [23] knows that and tries to take advantage of the situation. It is true that Russia - as Ivan Krastev [23] has written on **openDemocracy** - does not have a clear strategy either: it acts on the feeling of resentment rather than rational calculation of its interest. But this does not help.

Energetic and effective western support is vital for the very existence of Georgia at the moment. However, we also understand the strategic complexity [23] of the situation and do not want to be seen to be trying to provoke a new global conflict. Therefore, in conclusion, I want to focus on the moral side of the issue.

Europe has expressed especial moral strictness when it came to dealing with anything smacking of the Nazi legacy. The European Union imposed sanctions on Austria [23] over the inclusion in government of the far-right politician Jörg Haider [24], who never clearly stated that Hitler's policies were correct or that the German *Reich* should be restored, but was nonetheless believed to be a secret Nazi sympathiser. In January 2005, Prince Harry of Great Britain wore Nazi costume to a private fancy-dress party. The news leaked to the media and caused a public outrage; Prince Harry had to apologise. Such rigour stands in stark contrast to attitudes towards the communist legacy. For years, Russia has been ruled by a group of unrepentant KGB officers - which would be the moral equivalent of a country governed by SS veterans proud of their record. This was considered OK - after all, so many former communists came to power in central European countries and honoured democratic rules and procedures.

But Vladimir Putin and his team are different. As any former Soviet citizen would say: there is no such thing as a former KGB officer. When current Russian action is repeatedly compared to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia [25] in 1968, this is not just a historical parallel: there is a direct link. Putin was too young to take part in the invasion, but there is no evidence to suggest that even now he sees anything wrong in it (even though, in answering a question on a visit to Prague in 2006, he referred [26] to it as a "tragic event"). He may have understood the inefficiency of the communist economic policy, but his system of values is hardly different from those of his role model, Yuri Andropov [27]. He has openly lamented the break-up of the Soviet Union as the greatest political tragedy of the 20th century. What would happen had some German-speaking politician suggested that it's a pity Germany is now smaller than it was in 1939?

Putin is not a new Hitler nor even a new Stalin. It is unlikely that the world is on the brink of a new cold war: Russia has oil and gas but no ideological energy needed for that. But just because it is difficult to find a remedy for the Russian problem, it is not right to deceive oneself about the nature of Russian regime and the vitality of the Russian threat. Each nation (including Georgia, naturally) should act on an adequate understanding of it.

In that sense, open confrontation with Russia, however disastrous the human and economic costs, may also have some positive implications for the prospects of stable democracy in Georgia. For this country, Russia has not only been a security threat. It has also been the source from which the infection of illiberal political culture was spreading. Here, cultural closeness to a fellow-Orthodox country was a negative factor. As I said, democratic institutions are yet to fully consolidate in Georgia and the society is still not fully immune to the habits of the

Soviet past [28]: cultural and social closeness to Russia was an element reinforcing the power of these habits.

Being in open conflict with a huge and powerful neighbour [29] has its challenges for democracy too - the obligation to consolidate around government does not necessarily encourage openness to political pluralism. However, after this war - whenever it can be said truly to have ended - Russia will have even less leverage for influencing Georgian society than it had before, and Georgia will have even stronger incentives to embrace the values and institutions of the democratic west.

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