

August 2008 War: Countdown to Conflict

(By Mike Kielty in London (9-Mar-10

For four years before the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, South Ossetia, a region lying to north of the Georgian capital Tbilisi, was the scene of escalating tensions. South Ossetia was part of the Soviet Union along with the rest of Georgia. It enjoyed partial autonomy, but when the USSR disintegrated in 1991, Georgian nationalists attempted to bring South Ossetia into the new independent state they were creating. This was resisted by South Ossetians, who had strong links with their ethnic kin living in North Ossetia, which is part of Russia

The result was a brutal war in South Ossetia in 1990-92, which ended with an uneasy truce and a force of Georgians, Russians and South Ossetians keeping peace in the region. In a referendum in South Ossetia in 1991, a large majority voted for independence from Georgia, but this vote was not recognised by the Georgian government. A South Ossetian government was set up, and remains unrecognised by Tbilisi, which retains control of four villages populated mainly by ethnic Georgians

An uneasy peace was maintained in South Ossetia in the years up to 2004, when new Georgian president Mikhael Saakashvili made it clear he planned to bring South Ossetia back under Tbilisi's rule, along with Abkhazia, another region which had declared independence after a war with Georgian forces

January 2004

Mikhail Saakashvili, the 36-year-old reformist leader of the National Movement-Democratic Front, wins an overwhelming victory in the Georgian presidential election, collecting over 97 per cent of the vote

Saakashvili makes clear from the beginning that he aims to bring South Ossetia firmly back under Georgia's control, along Abkhazia, another secessionist entity, and Ajaria, a region that has developed relative autonomy since the early Nineties. The BBC reports that the day before he is sworn in as president, Saakashvili says that "Georgia will become strong and will restore its integrity

Saakashvili

Mikhail Saakashvili. Photo by Adele Smith

Saakashvili comes up with a framework for a federal Georgian state in which Abkhazia and South Ossetia would enjoy considerable increased autonomy. The unrecognised South Ossetian government treats this with scepticism, as Saakashvili has not consulted it about the proposal.

On **May 31**, Georgian interior ministry units land by helicopter at several South Ossetian villages populated mainly by ethnic Georgians. They set up roadblocks, apparently in an attempt to stop smuggling from Tskhinval, the South Ossetian capital (known as Tskhinvali to Georgians). Widespread smuggling is suspected in South Ossetia, which lies on the main transport route between Russia and Georgia. The leader of the Russian peacekeeping forces calls for the checkpoints to be removed, but Georgia sends in more troops to support them. The situation quietsens down when the Georgian troops leave after a couple of days. South Ossetia has not seen this level of tension since the end of the war in 1992.

Saakashvili shuts down Ergneti, a large market in South Ossetia, which the Georgians say has been used to trade contraband goods. The action reinforces support for Russia among many South Ossetians. In retaliation, the South Ossetians stop traffic on the main road between Russia and the South Caucasus. The Russians also condemn the Georgian operation.

Georgian forces stop two Russian trucks in South Ossetia on **July 2** and 300 rockets are found on board. The Russians say the trucks are there legally. The following day, South Ossetian forces retaliate against by detaining 50 Georgian troops. They are released only after they have been pictured as kneeling captives. Small-scale fighting then breaks out, reportedly between Georgian and Ossetian police units. Saakashvili "accuses Russian peacekeepers of being on the side of the "separatists

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A senior Russian politician, Andrei Kokoshin, escapes from a gunfight on August 4, which he blames on "extremist forces" in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital. Skirmishes between South Ossetian and Georgian forces erupt across South Ossetia. The South Ossetians report the burning of houses and wounding of civilians. An agreement between the two sides on **August 18** brings most of the fighting to a close. The International Crisis

Group estimates that the death toll between July and August was 17 .Georgians and five Ossetians

Short caption. Photo © IWPR

November 2004

Residents of four Georgian villages in South Ossetia temporarily block the main highway between Russia and Georgia. They say this is in response to the kidnapping of a villager by the Ossetians. Twenty Ossetians are .reportedly taken hostage

On **November 4**, a meeting between Georgian prime minister Zurab Zhvania and the president of South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoity, in the Russian city of Sochi, ends with an agreement that South Ossetia will be demilitarised. The only armed forces left there are to be peacekeeping troops and a small number of police. Both sides have claimed that the other has been reinforcing militia forces in South Ossetia, despite the fact that the 1992 peace del stated that only peacekeeping forces should be .armed

May 2005

George Bush, the first United States president to visit Georgia, calls for the situation in South Ossetia to be resolved peacefully before a crowd of more than 100,000 people in Tbilisi. Bush states that "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia must be respected". But he also says that

Georgia's politicians know that a "peaceful resolution of conflict is essential" if Georgia is to become more integrated within the international community. The implication of Bush's words is that his administration respects Georgia's claim over South Ossetia, but wants the dispute to be .resolved peacefully

September 2005

South Ossetia signs an accord with North Ossetia pledging to work towards unification. As North Ossetia is Russian territory, this would effectively mean South Ossetia becoming part of Russia. North and South Ossetia are divided by the line of mountains that form the Russian-Georgian border. The Georgian government accuses Moscow of being

.behind the agreement

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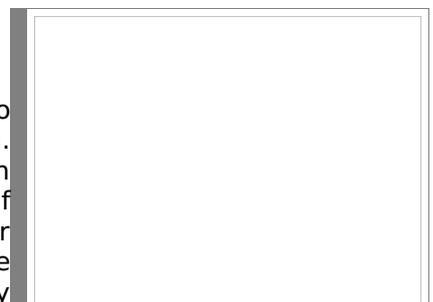
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On **September 20**, two days after the signing of the unification deal, South Ossetia celebrates the 15th anniversary of its declaration of independence from Georgia. A military parade is held in Tskhinval, but the celebrations are interrupted by three mortar shells that explode near the .city centre

January 2006

Explosions on two major pipelines in North Ossetia running from Russia to Georgia stop the supply of gas to Georgia. Shortly afterwards, a blast cuts an electricity line in the Russian region of Karachai-Cherkessia, reducing the power supply from Russia to Georgia. In the middle of a freezing winter, many Georgians are forced to go without heating. According to a BBC report, Russian officials say that the explosions on the North Ossetian pipelines were carried out by pro-Chechen .insurgents, and that they are investigating the incidents



Short caption. Photo © IWPR

Saakashvili blames the explosions on Moscow, claiming that it is an .attempt to make him give it control over Georgia's own gas pipeline

July 2006

Bomb attacks target two of South Ossetia's leading defence officials. The secretary of South Ossetia's security council, Oleg Alborov, is killed by a bomb on **July 9**. The South Ossetian authorities accuse the Georgian government of planning the assassination, though local people suspect he may have been murdered in retribution for killing a teenager who tried to .hijack his car

On **July 14**, Bala Bestauty, a member of the South Ossetian parliament and commander of a military unit, is attacked with a bomb that kills two .passing teenagers. Bestauty survives

At the same time, both the Georgians and the Russians build up their military strength. A brigade of Georgian interior ministry special forces arrived in the South Ossetian village of Pris in June. In July, 300 Russian .tanks are reported close to the border with South Ossetia

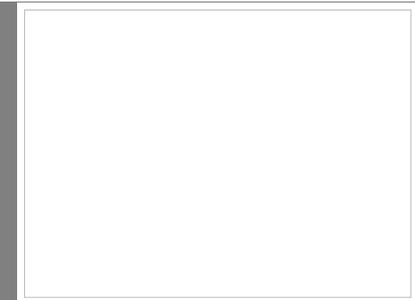
September 2006

A helicopter carrying the Georgian defence minister is fired on by South Ossetian forces. The South Ossetians claim that the helicopter had entered their airspace and that they were not aware that the minister, Irakli Okruashvili, was on board. No one is hurt in the incident.

On **September 27**, Georgia arrests four Russian officers on charges of espionage. They are later handed over to the Russian authorities. In response, Moscow cuts off transport and postal links with Georgia.

November 2006

South Ossetia holds a second referendum on independence from Georgia. The majority votes for South Ossetia to remain independent of Georgia, and Eduard Kokoity is re-elected as president. Kokoity makes clear that his priority is to foster closer links to Russia. The ballot is not recognised by the Georgian government.



Short caption. Photo © IWPR

In a separate ballot held in the predominantly Georgian village of Eredvi, an alternative, pro-Tbilisi president of South Ossetia, Dimitri Sanakoyev. He sets up his alternative government in the village of Kurta, and calls for South Ossetia to remain part of Georgia.

South Ossetia is left with two rival governments, neither of which has been endorsed by the international community.

May 2007

Kokoity orders checkpoints to be set up on the roads leading to the Georgian-controlled part of South Ossetia. Only people with Russian or South Ossetian passports can pass through.

In the days that follow, there are reports of gunfire in the region. No serious injuries are reported. Kokoity's government says that the checkpoints are necessary to protect the safety of South Ossetians. Nonetheless, Ossetian villages are also affected by the blockade. In the Proni valley, 16 villages are cut off from food for several days.

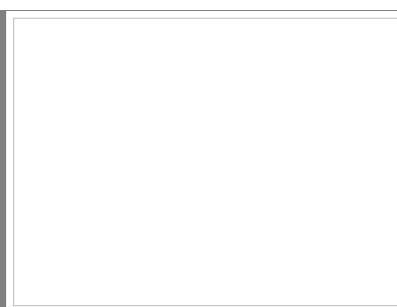
Russia begins to cooperate fully with the governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, enraging the Georgians. The Georgian minister for reintegration, Temur Yakobashvili, says, "We see a blatant attempt by Russia to carry out some form of annexation - in this case more in [Abkhazia than in the Tskhinvali region [meaning South Ossetia

Later in April, the Russians increase the number of their peacekeeping troops in Abkhazia. The Georgians claim that the Russians have shot down one of their drones, which the latter deny

Firefights between Georgian and South Ossetian forces, including the use of artillery, bring the focus of the tension back to South Ossetia. Georgian troops take part in a United States-led military exercise near Tbilisi, while Russian troops also begin an exercise close to the border with Georgia. The area is becoming increasingly militarised, with both sides concerned not to lose face

August 7 - At 11.35 pm on August 7, Saakashvili orders Georgian forces to begin a military operation in South Ossetia. Georgian artillery opens fire on targets in the region

August 8 - Georgian troops enter South Ossetia in the early hours of August 8. The attack comes hours after Saakashvili had promised South Ossetia "unlimited autonomy" and announced a ceasefire in area. The Russians respond with air attacks on Georgian forces. These are later extended to targets outside South Ossetia. The Georgians claim Russian forces entered South Ossetia before they moved in on August 7



Short caption. Photo © IWPR

August 10 - The Georgians declare a ceasefire. They begin pulling troops out of South Ossetia. Russian troops press home offensives in South Ossetia before moving on towards Gori, a town in central Georgia, and also move south of the Abkhazian-Georgian frontier in the west

August 12 – The Russian president, Dimitry Medvedev, tells his forces to stop fighting. The Georgians have been forced out of both South Ossetia and the Kodori gorge, the only part of Abkhazia they previously held.
.Moscow is criticised by the American and British governments

August 16 – The Russians and Georgians sign a peace deal, negotiated by the French president Nicolas Sarkozy in his role as president of the European Union. This deal stipulates that Georgia and Russia should withdraw their forces to the positions they held before the war. Russian forces do not all fully withdraw from South Ossetia or Georgia. IWPR's Nana Kurashvili reports in early September that Russian forces are still in
.the Georgian port of Poti

The Russians and Ossetians claim the Georgian attack was part of a plan to recapture the region and bring it back under central control. The
.Russians deny their armed forces entered South Ossetia before August 7

A subsequent report by the EU estimates that 850 people were killed in the conflict, including 365 South Ossetians, 170 Georgian troops, and 65 Russian soldiers, and that more than 100,000 people were forced to leave
.their homes

August 19 – NATO's secretary general, Jaap de Hoof Scheffer, says that "business as usual" with Moscow will not be possible until Russian troops are withdrawn from Georgia. He promises that NATO will set up a
.commission to examine whether Georgia could become a member

August 26 – Russia recognises South Ossetia and Abkhazia as
.independent states

September 2008

US vice-president Dick Cheney visits Tbilisi on **September 4**. The BBC reports that Cheney announces a one billion US dollars aid package to Georgia, to assist "work to overcome an invasion of your sovereign territory". He also says, "Russia's actions have cast grave doubt on
".Russia's intentions and on its reliability as an international partner

Later in September, Russia signs treaties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which allows it to keep military bases in both regions. It plans to leave
.3,800 troops in both regions

November 2008

Saakashvili and the Polish president, Lech Kaczynski, accuse Russian troops of firing at them as they drive in a convoy close to South Ossetia. Russian peacekeeping troops deny the claim. Saakashvili says this incident
.proves that Russia is violating the EU-brokered ceasefire

There is a standoff between Georgian and Russian forces in Perevi, a village in South Ossetia populated mainly by ethnic Georgians. Despite EU demands, Russia kept troops in the village since August. On December 12, its troops retreated, only to return again when an armed Georgian police unit entered the town. Eventually the Georgians were forced out



April 2009

Short caption. Photo © IWPR

Up to 60,000 people protest against Saakashvili outside the parliament in Tbilisi on **April 9**. They blame him for the defeat in the war in South Ossetia and say he has undermined democracy in the country. They call on him to resign. Saakashvili says that he will remain in power until the end of his term in 2013. The protests continue for several days, although numbers gradually decline

September 2009

The authors of an EU report on the August 2008 war conclude that “all sides in the conflict – Georgian forces, Russian forces and South Ossetian forces – committed violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law”. The report says it was impossible to substantiate Tbilisi’s claims that Russian armed forces entered South Ossetia before Georgian troops were sent in on August 7

.Mike Kielty is an IWPR intern in London

Caucasus :Location
Stavropol
South Ossetia
Russia