

Caucasus Burning

Author: [Thomas de Waal](#)

So much has been left in ruins in the Caucasus in the past week. What chance is there of a salvage operation?

The landscape is littered with wreckage. First, South Ossetia was ravaged; now Georgia is experiencing a great tragedy. Amid the wider carnage, the greatest losers are the 25,000 or so ethnic Georgians of South Ossetia. Only a month ago Ossetians and Georgians were buying and selling from one another in South Ossetia by day even as armed men in their villages exchanged fire at night. Now those Georgians face total dispossession, their homes burned by South Ossetian irregular fighters. Around 50,000 Georgians in Abkhazia are still in their homes, but they face a precarious future. These people have the greatest moral right to pass judgement on a long list of culprits.

Russia's guilt is of course the most blatant. The Russian army has unleashed atavistic violence and allowed Ossetians and North Caucasians to follow in its wake, re-inflaming inter-ethnic hatreds that had begun to fade after the wars of the 1990s. The cost of this will be there for years and Moscow should pay the price, in terms of both economic compensation for the wreckage it has caused and international opprobrium. On the latter, Germany could take the lead by threatening to cancel the joint Nord Stream project – a Russian gas pipeline with a political agenda, designed to bypass Moscow's critics in Poland and the Baltic states.

Next in line for criticism is the Georgian leadership, which has now all but lost the two disputed territories. Georgia is a small nation under threat from the Russians, and in the short term Georgians will rally around their leader. But there almost certainly will be a reckoning with their impetuous president, Mikheil Saakashvili.

Since coming to power in 2004, Saakashvili has been a man in a hurry. His economic reforms are impressive, but he was courting trouble from the start when he promised to win back Abkhazia and South Ossetia within five years. A brief look at the Balkans, Cyprus or Northern Ireland tells you that complex ethno-territorial conflicts need more time to heal than that. Yet Saakashvili deliberately thawed the (misleadingly named) "frozen conflicts", challenging the Russian-framed peacekeeping operations and moving his security forces closer to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He kept up the economic isolation of the two territories and rejected any initiatives to open them up – for example, by allowing the Abkhaz to trade with Turkey – as a threat to Georgian sovereignty.

His rhetoric was just what the Russians wanted to hear and they moved in to fill the vacuum economically, politically and militarily. Many Abkhaz were unhappy about being swallowed by Russia, but the argument that Moscow was guaranteeing their security trumped all others. Now the Russians are triumphant.

How did Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution, which was greeted with such euphoria by Georgians, end up like this? I was present at Saakashvili's first press conference after the revolution. There he said explicitly – and in Russian – that in contrast to his predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze, he wanted "normal relations" with Russia.

Vladimir Putin, pushing first as president and now as prime minister to build the resurgent Russia that we saw rampaging through Georgia last week, played a leading role in this. But it is hard to imagine the wily Shevardnadze allowing himself to get sucked into a war with Russia.

Many Washington policy makers played their part, too. They loved the idea of a new "beacon of democracy" run by thirty-something economic reformers astride an important energy corridor and standing up to Russia. But they all too often neglected to pay attention to what Georgia was actually doing. The Georgians basked in American attention and felt emboldened to challenge Moscow even more. When President George W. Bush stood on Freedom Square in Tbilisi in May 2005 and told Georgians, "The path of freedom you have chosen is not easy, but you will not travel it alone", they believed it meant something.

When I asked a senior United States official four years ago what Washington would do if Russia attempted a military assault on Georgia, he said, "We won't send in the US cavalry." But now it looks as though this was precisely what Saakashvili was counting on.

As for Europe, France and Germany, they might say that their cooler approach to Georgia all along looks wise in retrospect. But they have little to be proud of. The European Union had the opportunity to approve a new border-monitoring force for Georgia in 2005, when the Russians blocked the continuation of the old one under the aegis of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. But France and Germany vetoed the plan. The unarmed force could have been an early-warning system had it been in place this

year, and might have helped deter the Russian campaign.

Few western policy makers have engaged seriously with the South Caucasus, and they would do well now to ponder the fact that South Ossetia was not even the most dangerous of the region's conflicts. That dubious honour goes to Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. There, tens of thousands of troops face each other across 110 miles (175 kilometres) of trenches, and angry rhetoric is strong on both sides. The fragile Karabakh ceasefire is observed by just six unarmed European monitors. If the world wakes up to the danger of the ceasefire breaking, there will have been at least one good outcome from the Georgian tragedy.

Negotiations over the Karabakh conflict have been fruitless so far, but they have come up with a useful formula for squaring the separatist circle. A draft peace plan under discussion would defer the issue of the status of the disputed region of Karabakh itself. Instead, the region would have some interim status short of statehood while other issues, such as the return of Azerbaijani land currently occupied by Armenians outside Nagorno-Karabakh, are resolved and refugees begin to return home.

That kind of solution now looks to be the most desirable one for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Abkhaz and Ossetians themselves have far more reason to want to live well with their Georgian neighbours than the Russians do. Giving them some kind of international guarantees and more power to dictate their own futures is the only way to lift the Russian wolf off their shoulders and allow at least some Georgian refugees to go home.

Yet it is probably too late. The Russians now have a tight grip and will try to keep others out. President Dmitry Medvedev said last week that Abkhaz and Ossetians "do not trust anyone but Russian troops...We are the only guarantors of stability in the region".

Answering that charge is a big physical and moral challenge for both Europe and the United States. If they want to fix things in the region, they need to consider a new version of the mass peaceful intervention they made in the Balkans from the mid-1990s, in the form of policemen and peacekeepers, human-rights investigations, and large-scale economic investment. It would be expensive, but in the end it would probably cost much less than doing nothing.

Thomas de Waal is IWPR Caucasus editor.

This piece first appeared in The Wall Street Journal.

The views expressed in this article are not necessarily the views of IWPR.

Location: [Caucasus](#)

Topic: [Conflict](#)

Focus: [Caucasus](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/caucasus-burning>