

"I Should Have Screamed More" - Saakashvili on 2008 War

Author: [Vazha Tavberidze](#)

Former President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili opens up over the disappointments, betrayals and deals made in the run-up to the 2008 war.

This is a full transcript, edited for clarity, of the exclusive, wide-ranging interview the former president of Georgia gave IWPR's Vazha Tavberidze.

IWPR: Looking back at things from a decade-long perspective, do you think the West has learned any lessons from the 2008 war?

Saakashvili: The thing is, the West is motivated by several instincts and one of the main instincts is appeasement. They always want to delay the problem, they always want to refer to the past, to the future, anything but the present. Nobody wants trouble and the [Western] politicians' basic instinct is to keep trouble away, to ignore it or to pretend they don't see it and that it's not real.

Is there a sense of personal disillusionment? Have you become disappointed with the West over the years?

Yes and no. At the beginning I was very idealistic about the West and I thought that it was motivated by exactly the same values as I am, something special based on the rule of law, democracy of society. It's not to say it's completely gone - these are still the main principles. In the West, you can always appeal to conscience, they might not always hear you but you can break through; can you always break through? No. Are they susceptible to manipulation or self-manipulation? Sure they are. But are they still the best ones available? Yes, they are. That's how I look at it now, I look much more soberly, I think that they can be very hypocritical, they have double standards, they also have this attitude which I think might be a remnant of colonialism, but they genuinely think that the smaller newcomers at the table are not supposed to succeed. Henry Kissinger told Sarah Palin once in a private conversation that made its way to me, that 'Saakashvili is like a small-time player that comes to the table with big players with no cards in his pocket to play poker'.

Would you say it's quite an accurate take on what you were actually doing?

In a way, yes, but look, we had cards; the thing is they didn't want to acknowledge the cards we had; we were the biggest soft power in this huge area of world: Eurasia. That's the point; that's what they never realised.

They could not or did not want to realize that?

Could not and did not, and that's why I called it a colonialist approach. Their take is that nobody's supposed to create standards in our part of the world, standards are only created in the West and if you create your own standards in this part of the world which are already parallel, very similar to Western standards, it won't work out. You can just take their franchise, you cannot create your own political McDonald's, McDonald's can only come from the West; that's the point. That's what the biggest thing which I only realized through practice that they want you to be successful but they don't want you to be too successful. We, on the other hand, we'd go in and say, 'Oh, by the way, we have like the best business registration, fastest customs in the world, we are the safest country in Europe'.

Would you agree that you were considered cocky and impetuous because of that approach?

Yes, for instance, one Western ambassador when I was in Georgia said, 'Saakashvili has the pharaonic projects of Batumi and the houses of justice, he wants to be a pharaoh, he just doesn't want to be a normal leader.'

Do you think that perception harmed just you? Or did it harm the country as well?

The country, for sure, but what can we do? We cannot just claim to be lucky dummies, being successful.

Does this also explain why your recent Foreign Policy article, where you argued that the next threat from Russia would target non-NATO member countries, was dismissed by many Western policy-makers? Why do you think you were labelled a doomsayer?

It's because they never want to hear the uncomfortable truth. They did not want to hear uncomfortable

truths about the possible invasion of Georgia and they did not want to hear about Crimea, Donbas, they don't want to hear the truth because if you hear the truth and then you seriously start to discuss it then you have to act and they don't want to act. The reason I said it about Scandinavia is that I know Putin; he is desperate now, he's looking for some kind of way out, to prolong his reign. He already tried everything else, and Putin is always increasing his red lines - so thing is, he thinks, first we went to Georgia - it was an easy target, it was a small target - then he went to Ukraine, in parallel he goes to Syria. So, the strategy is that Russia goes to the places where the West wants to engage but not fully, and then they engage fully and that's how they outsmart the West every time. If Russia attacks non-NATO member Scandinavian countries, what will the West will do? Not much. Not even attack back. They don't want to attack because it's risky. We are not talking about full-blown invasion here. Will population of Sweden really fight for some small island and risk like thousands of lifes for that small island? I don't think so. and will the West engage, will NATO come to their help if Russians just take like a small, mini-Faulklands somewhere in that area?

You do really think seizing something in Scandinavia would be a bite Putin would be allowed to chew?

Well, it doesn't fall under Article 5 and the population of a small Scandinavian country will not risk their livelihoods and future and everything for a small piece of land and even if they do, they will be defeated. I remember the head of Sweden's general staff even saying that they would be defeated by Russia within ten days. Having this in mind, to the pragmatic Swedes that's really not much of a choice: are we willing to be defeated [with] like 20,000 people killed or are we just going to go for diplomatic, legal means to solve this issue? I think it's obvious what path they would choose.

Let's go back to the chief topic of our conversation, the 2008 August War. An overwhelming consensus among Western scholars and politicians, not to mention the current Georgian government, is that Saakashvili was provoked by Russia and he fell for it, he was goaded into starting a war. Do you agree with that?

No, it's not true. Crimea clearly proved there's two scenarios: either surrender fully or you just fight. There is no third scenario; when they're already in, who has started the war? The [post 2008 war] Tagliavini report played on this in a very nasty way. They said - Russian troops were already in but the conflict was started by Georgia; excuse me, what do you mean by troops were in? What the hell is that? Is that an acceptable thing? Well, troops were already in Crimea and conflict never started because the Ukrainians didn't fight, so does that make it an invasion or not? Do you have to resist invasion or what? It's quite simple.

What I think they are referring to is that as bad as the situation might have been before, your decision to take control of Tskhinvali was what led to a full-scale war and invasion. And that was exactly what Russia wanted you to do.

Russia's scenario was very clear. It was articulated, not speculated. [Eduard] 'Kokoity [the then de facto president of South Ossetia] said, 'We will clean our valleys of bandits' - their scenario was a full-scale invasion but under the disguise of Ossetian forces fighting some locals, and if we at a certain moment started to resist - and it would be hard for us not to resist because there were pictures of people being killed and slaughtered and cleansed - that would trigger some kind of reaction and they would follow the victorious Kokoity all the way to Tbilisi to secure South Ossetia's independence. Had we not done anything, ok, they could have stopped there but it would damage us anyway, because a full-scale invasion was on the cards. There was no good scenario for us in this.

Was that a scenario when there was no other option but to fight? Could not responding perhaps be the lesser of two evils?

From my perspective if you don't fight, at least you try. And we made other mistakes. Another mistake was that we were not ready - our fear had become chronic and we were not ready for what happened. We were very tense.

Was that paranoia?

No... it was very tense; later, at a certain moment we started to tell ourselves it might be okay now, because in spring we were very close to war, then there was lots of mediation and then at certain moment, we let ourselves think it was ok... you know, it's a small country, people have to go for holidays, officers have to go for holidays, government has to rest somewhere. I myself was very close to taking over Tbilisi Airport that night, August 7. I went to the airport twice and I came back twice; I was leaving for China. We were going to Beijing for the Olympics; the tension has become so chronic that there was shooting, subsiding, shooting, again subsiding and then we said ok, that's as normal, nothing new there, I'd better go to Beijing and see the leaders. I'd better go and complain.

If the tension had become chronic, if you and the establishment began to cope with it, then what prompted the decision regarding Tskhinvali?

Because in the evening they started shooting en masse, that's why I stayed. The plan before that was to put them on standby before trying to take anything back and for me to go to Beijing and say, look we have the situation - to Bush or somebody - we have this situation, please interfere. I tried to call everyone and nobody would pick up; only Jaap De Hoopscheffer, then NATO secretary general spoke to me on an open line and I couldn't say much on an open line. I just described the general situation. I tried to call Frank-Walter Steinmeier, then German minister of foreign affairs; he was on holiday. I tried to call someone in Washington and nobody was there. [Senior official] Michael Carpenter was the only one who was on duty in the state department; then I managed to speak with Carl Bildt, the Swedish minister of foreign affairs and that was it. We weren't really sure of anything.

One of the more severe accusations that are often aimed at you is that Saakashvili bombed a sleeping Tskhinvali. Looking back, is there any other way you wish you had gone about that?

When you launch a military operation, it's a military protocol, you don't make decisions on the political field. When you are fighting an uphill battle, it's the military that calls the shots. Certainly, they had been instructed to uphold humanitarian values. The Human Rights Watch report clearly says that when Georgians entered some Ossetian villages, they said, 'Don't worry, Misha [Saakashvili] told us not to touch you.' But that was the attitude, they knew that they had to uphold norms but otherwise it was up to them what firepower to use against targets, you cannot control it politically. The problem was we couldn't get to those valleys which were under attack any more - the road was blocked, so the solution was to clear a way to that road and you know, either if you go through mountains for that, you are an inviting target, they can shoot you and especially GRU troops [Russian special forces] were on the main hill and they could target that road easily. The thing was these proverbial 'green people' were already there and GRU troops sitting firmly on the mountain, seizing strategically important positions.

Whatever the goal might have been, what happened in Tskhinvali was seen as a major Georgian offensive. Would you not think that launching a major offensive would be a tipping point?

No, because it had a clear target and furthermore it was in clear response to all their major offences because what they did was also major offensive; they attacked our troops, they attacked our villages with all the firepower that they could use against a peaceful population. What we did was an adequate response to their major offensive. Russian troops were attacking from several directions with massed firepower, GRU troops were coordinating with the so-called South Ossetia troops - it was already an offensive. The only way we could stop it, considering we didn't have much presence on the ground, was artillery. At least that's what the military decided.

And what was the expected result?

To move fast through the city and valleys and to get to the area where we could lock the road and block their further advancement. The Roki tunnel was already teeming with Russian tanks, so we had to go, we had to pass through Tskhinvali, but we were late, the Russians had already started what turned out to be an invasion. They were already for sure in the tunnel, they were in village of Java; they were waiting for things to happen here. So if you want to talk about our mistakes, our mistake was to act too late and do too little. In the end we did whatever we could, but we were stalled and we had just some pieces of the bigger picture, at that time all we had to act upon was merely pieces of information.

The late Robert Asmus' excellent book about the 2008 war makes the striking point that Georgia and your government had no defence strategy in the case of war. If you had so much information, how hard must have it been to envisage that some sort of defence strategy was needed?

Because politically our approach towards South Ossetia was very clear - for soft power, we don't fight there, and we never fought the Russians would start fighting there. South Ossetia is like a chessboard: so you have Georgian villages, Ossetian villages, and they are so intertwined that we thought they wouldn't really think about starting a big scale operation here, it made no sense. Abkhazia, on the other hand, was a clear-cut case, because it's an empty territory, they can go through. And that's where I miscalculated over Putin because our thinking was that they would never go for Tbilisi, and we were also convinced by our Western friends about that. So our reasoning was that if the Russians decided to fight for Abkhazia and South Ossetia they would rather fight for Abkhazia.

Who were those Western friends?

Everyone. Everyone said the Russians would never invade us; Condi Rice always said that; she said I know the Russians, I went, I skated in Russia as a young girl, I went to Moscow, MGIMO [the Moscow State Institute of International Relations], I know them, they will provoke you but they will never do anything. That was their assessment; the only guy who said otherwise was Steinmeier; Steinmeier put this to us very bluntly, now that I think of that. It was an assessment of German intelligence based on their internal sources in Moscow because Steinmeier came to Georgia in a very hasty way and he was nervous, you

could see that, he just came because he thought an invasion would happen and he wanted to show that beforehand at least they tried to do something and he told us, in the German way, that there will be an invasion.

When was that?

When he came for his shuttle mission; then he went to see [Russian foreign minister Sergei] Lavrov and then he came to see Abkhaz in the town of Gali; he came again back to Batumi and told us that. We were sitting in a restaurant with several members of our government and one of them asked him a question, 'Mr Minister, will you help us with bringing in international peacekeepers to both our conflict zones?' Steinmeier puts his fork down and says, 'Guys, what peacekeepers are you talking about? You'll soon have a large-scale war here.' And we were, like, what? [Steinmeier said] 'I'll tell you how it will happen there will be shooting between you and them all the time, in the past, they've stopped but this time they will not stop, they will shoot back and they will shoot back more. And at a certain point you will have to go in and retaliate and then Russians will hit you with their full force and then there'll be full-scale war; the only thing we can do is to separate it.' He described it in very precise terms. Then there was the Russian ambassador in the EU, who was good friends with the member of the European parliament Elmar Brok, and Brok told me at the Yalta Conference in July 2008 that he had mentioned to this ambassador that he was planning to visit Georgia in September to try and solve the situation somehow. And the ambassador up and tells him Elmar, September is too late, if you want to go, go now. Elmar, being a smart guy, understood the clear hint given to him and asked me, 'Are the Russians planning something or what?'

You and your guys were apparently not smart enough, you still thought that Russia would not go so far.

No, because many others told us no, no, no, don't worry. But let us look at their timeline, what they did. They blocked us in NATO but then they said let it be decided in the December ministerial [meeting]; so they gave Russia this time framework, the Germans and French, to do something. And Russia had the motivation to act because there was a chance we could have gotten the MAP in December and basically the Germans gave them the greenlight by saying okay, we are postponing till December.

So Russia got a window of opportunity.

Yeah, it's more or less like a kind of German-Russian game; I don't think Germans wanted war, of course, but they at least gave the Russians some leeway to do what they did.

Back then, you and your team made conflicting statements. On the one hand you kept telling the world that Russia was going to invade either tomorrow or after tomorrow or by the end of the week. On the other hand you insisted on telling the Georgian people that Russia did not believe this region was worth the trouble, that they wouldn't do anything. Why?

If Russia wanted to stop, you should have given them leeway because if the public screamed, 'It's Russia, Russia, Russia,' then it's the end of story, then they would have to go through with this till the end. We were expecting that at a certain point they would say, okay, okay, that's not us, if international pressure had been there or worked, Russia always had to be given a way out of this, to say that's not us, that's them, but then nobody else applied pressure, that was the problem; there was no one to apply pressure.

So that was a diplomatic narrative that did not work out.

No, it didn't, because you need two to tango. We also needed the West to tell them to stop and the West was so confused and lost that their first instinct was to blame us because the Russian narrative made its way into the Western narrative, they used the words said by Bush in Beijing; Bush tells Putin, look, you know that Saakashvili is hot-blooded. But that's the Russian narrative that got into the American narrative. The Russians were doing this for years.

Do you think you contributed to that narrative?

No, I don't think in my conversations with President Bush I was hot-headed. But for many years they were saying Saakashvili is hot-headed, Saakashvili is impetuous. And this was such an overwhelming sentiment. Now we know how it works with the Russian propaganda machine, then nobody else knew.

You're absolving yourself of all blame when it comes to that image?

Well, I can be emotional but it's not like I am crazy. I could be tough with the Westerners, I mean it's not like I'm such a piece of cake. But look, another thing which I had with the Westerners which wasn't really appreciated by them is that I came to them as an equal, to preach what they preach - but they don't always want to practice what they preach. When the small country comes to their table and talks to them like an equal they don't always appreciate that, they think you're getting ahead of yourself. It's obvious. Now I know it, back then I thought this is my world, here we are equals. The Americans usually are more tolerant of this, but I remember, for example, how the Obama administration reacted when we said Georgia would block Russia's entry to the World Trade Organisation. They couldn't believe their eyes that

we were doing that.

I've heard from two former US ambassadors and several experts that your government went on proselyting among Western neocons, asking them how much they could count on the US in the event of war. Can you confirm that?

We never said the war would happen, we would say, 'Russia is attacking us' and be told 'Russia will never attack you, don't worry'. Neo-cons and everybody else, they had the vision that it's still a new world where nothing happens without America knowing and running it; so there is no way Russia can try to change the world, they'd say. George Bush told me when he was in Tbilisi in 2005, he said, 'Misha, how does it feel now, that you can now tell Putin, I'm next to this big guy, come and get me?' That was his way of saying, from now on you are under my protection. He was cocky, Bush... But even Americans didn't appreciate it when during the war I spoke with Bush and then Condi came, and she said it was her worse press conference in her life, when I basically accused the West of appeasement for all this period. She was very unhappy, not that she could argue about anything I said except that she said that it's just not nice. I felt that it was my last big moment to speak out for a long time when the world media was listening and I wanted this to be remembered, what I said that this is an appeasement and that's going to continue. As you see now, I was right because it continued in Crimea.

Would you confirm or deny that some members of the neo-con elite that I mentioned earlier gave the government of Georgia assurances that if the war did indeed break out, they'd be on your side?

No, nobody ever gave such assurance and we would never discuss it, discussing this was already taboo. You don't discuss such things based on "ifs" - asking them such a question would be a huge provocation. It's an absolute Russian myth and some leftist myth from Americans. Of course, I said, 'What happens if they attack? But I asked these questions to Condi Rice, to others and they said no, they are not going to attack. In her book she twisted things and she says, 'I warned Saakashvili not to dabble' - that is not true. I was only asking what will happen if they still do it and she would say no, they would never do it. She told the story in a way that would fit her narrative; at that table there were about 20 people present and there are so many witnesses who can confirm it. She was saying don't get provoked. Ok Condi, we won't get provoked but what if they attack us? 'They're not going to attack you, don't do anything.' That's how the conversation went.

You don't do anything - that could be construed as a warning, can't it?

You don't get provoked and they won't do anything; they will just provoke and I said, 'What if they go beyond provocation, they just attack us, what do we do?' I asked her, 'What is your red line?' 'No, they won't do it, don't worry,' she answered; I said, 'What's the red line, what is the red line when America will do something and not just fuss about?' They said, 'Don't worry, they won't do it.' So that was the thing Russians knew well. And during that conversation she said, "Misha, we never really recognised how high the stakes are for the Russians and they're much higher than we have in this region, that's what they are exploiting.'

At what point did you realize that war with Russia was inevitable?

Well it was already a very dangerous situation in May that year. Not earlier; earlier Putin menaced me but again I said like I thought it was part of a diplomatic game Of course I took it seriously but I considered it to be blackmail tactics. But then again, [Putin] told it to me, straight to my face, in Minsk in 2006 after the Russian spy scandal. He said that, and I remember then Andrey Ilarioniov, his former advisor, also told me in 2007 in Lithuania that there was a plan to attack Georgia militarily. And Putin in February 2008 basically de facto told us that, but again in a subtle way, he said that you will have a little pain but you won't suffer too much. But I think May was the crucial point when they started to bring troops into Abkhazia, racking up infrastructure in a hasty way and then we started to really panic in a way, because these things were happening. That's when I decided to send this letter to the Russians offering them some kind of arrangement in Abkhazia because, again, we thought that they're all about Abkhazia and that offered us something, some solution just short of out-and-out war.

One of the more peculiar things that we've read about the war is that you offered Putin that you abandon NATO membership ambitions in exchange for solving the conflicts issue. Is that true?

No, it was pure rhetoric. I told him, at the very first meeting I asked him, 'So what's your main issue with Georgia? I mean, like is it NATO, is it the US, is it the presence of your troops in Georgia?' Every time he would say, 'America? We are friends with America too, what's the problem? NATO, look at what is NATO, should we be scared of three planes they have in the Baltic countries, what's the issue? No issue. Our troops? Our own generals are saying they're useless; we have just old tanks; so it's not any point of discussion at all.'

Later on, when he started to openly menace us he said, 'Ok, you're part of the West, so the West is doing

this thing with Kosovo now and we have to do something against you; to which my response was, 'If it's like that, then ok, maybe we will not be part of the West. Will that stop you doing these things to us and will you leave us alone?' To which his response was very cynical. 'I don't exchange your territories for your geopolitical orientation.' I didn't expect such a blunt, cynical answer but more or less it was obvious what his position was.

Had there been a serious offer, would you consider that scenario?

Would I never consider it if we had guarantees? I don't know; for my country I would consider just about anything but at that moment it was just pure rhetoric... Well, at least I can say now that every option was on the table and they refused to take any.

Do you think that looks good for your Western-Atlantist image?

We were under threat of full annihilation. There was this moment when Condi Rice reached Lavrov on the third day of the war. She asked him what's your goal in Georgia, the answer was - full annihilation; What do you do when you hear that somebody wants to fully annihilate your country? When you face that kind of threat you have to at least rhetorically try every option. Was it ever doable? I do not think so, even if Russians were to agree. Thing is we were very vulnerable, we needed time. Russia, on the other hand, chose their time really well. Not that they were hiding their intentions much. I remember they were telling the Westerners about it; deputy defence minister [Yuri] Baluevski met NATO ambassadors in Brussels during the NATO council in March and he told them they'd start war in Georgia, straight to their face. The same thing happened with Bush when he met Putin in Sochi in May 2008. I remember, I think it was [former US diplomat] Matthew Bryza, who was present at the talks [Note: Bryza told IWPR that he did not attend the Bush-Putin meeting to which Saakashvili referred] who told me what happened there, that Putin started screaming that there'd be war in Georgia. I remember I was startled and I asked, 'Well, what did you say, what did Bush say?' 'Nothing,' was the answer. Why? Because they already knew our position. That was seen by Putin as a major sign of weakness and some kind of semi-green light, Bush's silence. He had to look straight into Putin's eyes and say, 'Stop, don't you dare do it.' By the way, Bryza had the clearest picture of what happened in 2008. There was the moment when I was begging Bush to appoint him us ambassador to Georgia and he almost agreed But Condi was against that.

That makes it five major political figures you just listed saying that Russia was going to invade, and yet you still chose not to believe they would?

Yes. Part of me believed and part of me did not believe, because it never happened before, these Western guys are competent, maybe they know something which I don't know and maybe they have some more leverage which I don't know about, I thought.

Let's go back to Tskhinvali. Another argument often leveled against you is that if you were planning a major scale offensive, why not evacuate people from the valleys?

Because we didn't plan it, because the thing was that we were too late, they were much faster, they evacuated Tskhinvali not because they were afraid that people would die, they would be happy for them to die.

If you see that your enemy is evacuating people, wouldn't it be reasonable to do the same?

Because as I said, you know we had clashes in Kodori gorge beforehand, evacuating would be seen as another provocation. They evacuate, we evacuate; that's declaring a war zone and we start... war or what? Because war was the last thing we wanted. Nobody was actually prepared for mass operations in Tskhinvali from the start. It was a response to what the Russians were doing.

So nobody was prepared for it and nobody had any defensive strategy either?

I would go further - it was never even discussed, because everybody's assessment, including Western military experts who were in Georgia, was that whatever happens will take place only in the autonomous territory.

If you knew from March that there was a threat of Russian invasion, nobody ever thought, let's sit down and think how we will defend ourselves if the worst comes to the worst?

We had the Kosovo example. And because Putin wanted to mirror Kosovo we thought he'd settle for these territories. We thought the worst would be a small-scale engagement in those territories, he wouldn't go further. We never discussed the option that they go and invade Tbilisi. In our imagination even for the Russians it was too much; they would go for these two territories;

Are you telling me that we went into war with Russia or responded to war initiated by Russia, basically improvising our defensive strategy on the run?

There was certainly a conservative defensive strategy plans prepared for some kind of local conflict, but it

was not for a full-blown Russian invasion that goes to Tbilisi. No Western or Georgian expert ever advised this, and of course this was because, if that ever happened, the defence would only be diplomatic and political; there is no way you can envisage a full-blown Russian attack on your capital and be ready for it. We had plans about Abkhazia, because we thought they would go there, so we had plans how to contain them there: to create defensive lines maybe at Kodori or the last line at the Enguri river. When it came to South Ossetia, we miscalculated in a sense that we thought that for the Russians that wouldn't make sense. South Ossetia makes sense if you attack Tbilisi and because we had basically done an assessment that they would never attack Tbilisi, that's why we never really considered a South Ossetian operation as a big military option.

Another controversy was over the bombs that the Georgian side used, the cluster bombs.

We had things that were bought by many countries in this region; the Grad missiles, for example, bought by Azerbaijan, Central Asian and Eastern European countries. I am sorry, but that's what was on the market and I never went to inquire what were they buying. But whatever they were buying, was meant for artillery.

Were there enough precautions taken to not damage civilian targets during the offensive?

There were no civilian targets. We had given very clear instructions about that. If you look very carefully at what was hit in Tskhinvali, their government building and their own fire points were the targets that were fired at.

The Tagliavni Commission report emphasised that bullets were shot at Russian peacekeepers, one of the more damning points for the Georgian side. Was enough effort made to revoke their peacekeeper status?

No, not enough because had we started to revoke peacekeeper status it would have been seen by Westerners as if we were provoking, prompting a war because of what we were arguing, that we wanted them to be replaced by international peacekeepers. If you just remove them without any replacement that would be provocation - and so we would argue at every international meeting. It was part of our narrative everywhere for many years - please, replace them with international peacekeepers. It never came to that, sadly.

How would you rate the work of the Tagliavini commission?

It was a politicised commission. It was quite bad because the whole idea behind the commission was to get the responsibility off Russia, to share the blame.

Then why did you consent to it in the first place?

We didn't have any choice, unless we wanted to openly go against the European Union. The Americans were categorically against it. The Europeans would do it with or without our consent. But the thing is that Condi Rice, when I met her in New York, she said, 'It's crazy, the idea of commission is crazy; it's total bullshit.' That's what she said when they floated the idea of the commission.

There were also huge question marks about the impartiality of some of the members of the commission.

Yes, for example a German legal expert who... the second day after the commission report was issued, gave an interview to a German outlet where he said the West should now recognize Abkhazia. Tagliavini herself was very pro-separatist when she was in Georgia.

Why did not you protest against her candidacy?

Because at that moment it meant that we would have defied the European Union to the end and we weren't in that diplomatic position because that was the moment when I tried to talk to Bush in September in New York, he told me, 'Look Misha we have a world economic crisis right now, we don't have time for you.' And when American president tells you he does not have time for you, that has to mean something. Then we had no allies left. We had to contain further Russian intrusion in the rest of Georgia. From Putin's point of view, he had this moment where he thought he fell somewhat short, he didn't get me, he didn't get Tbilisi. So when the situation is so dire, would you also turn against the European Union? They weren't perfect allies, but we had no choice.

Did the commission's conclusions largely affect how the West perceived the conflict?

If you look carefully, if you read the report, facts are more or less reported accurately. But the thing is they say South Ossetia had the right to self-defence. That's such an absurd thing. Or they say troops were already in, but that was not yet the start of the conflict. So the foreign troops invade, these 'peacekeepers' were in the middle of everything and there are telephone intercepts when they say, let us destroy this village, that village - peacekeepers are not supposed to destroy villages. The thing is, it was all about

headlines; it was a Steinmeier game; I think backed by Merkel to dilute Russia's blame because there was a world economic crisis and the last thing the West needed was to help Georgia against Russia, as simple as that. The Americans didn't play that game but they didn't object too much to this either, unfortunately.

Looking back at the ceasefire plan that was negotiated by then-French President Sarkozy, how successful do you now think that was?

It was a disaster; it was obvious; the plan French [foreign minister Bernard] L. Couchner proposed was quite good.

What was Couchner's plan?

Ceasefire, the full withdrawal of the Russians and the full respect of Georgian territorial integrity. Then Sarkozy comes back from Moscow with a plan which has two more points: security zones and that the status of the territory should later be the subject of international discussions. I said that it's not acceptable, so in the end it was dropped by the Russians themselves, the seventh point.

Why do you think that putting the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia up for international debate - which you also claimed in one interview could take 20 or 30 years - was a worse alternative than Russia outright recognising them as independent countries?

They would have recognized it anyway, they wanted to mirror the Kosovo thing. Then they'd have said, well, the document says we need to discuss this with you at an international level as well. Me agreeing to slice up Georgia for some international debate beyond our control, somebody else gets to decide your status without you being a part, that's what they wanted to do.

How would you rate the job Sarkozy did?

Very bad. But Sarkozy really behaved like a clown, he was so incompetent... Sarkozy's resentment towards America, toward Eastern Europeans meant he basically sidelined the Americans. The Americans did not want him to do this mission. Sarkozy basically sidelined them from the diplomatic process and played a double game. Let's say the good, positive part of this mission is that the Russians are to withdraw, but on the other hand there were so many bad things: sidelining the Americans, giving Russia security zones, also giving them some kind of legitimate role and then the worst part of Sarkozy's behaviour was that he forgot about this agreement within a couple of months. He basically sold it for Mistrals.

Why didn't you say anything about it back in 2009, 2010, 2011? Every time Sarkozy arrived, you treated him as a close personal friend?

He was still president and he was president of France and he had lots of things to decide and I mean he tried to be nice to us on personal level. They gave us money for ski resorts at a very good rate. They gave us money for helicopters. They helped us in the international arena where they could not alienate the Russians. You couldn't call it broken relations, but whenever it concerned Russia, it was impenetrable.

The six point ceasefire agreement has no means to ensure that whatever it demands from the parties is fulfilled. How can you trust an international agreement that does not give you a safeguard mechanism?

That's the main problem; it made the good point that they had to withdraw but I stated from the start that the whole thing would go wrong. The Russians violated it right away because they got into the settlement of Akhgori after that agreement. According to the agreement, we had to withdraw as we did and then the Russians just went in. So the agreement helped them.

How much of a role do you think the whole Kosovo incident played in all this?

It played a huge role to legitimise in Putin's own eyes; Putin thought the West was hypocritical and he could legitimise his own hypocrisy by the West being hypocritical.

There is a story that during the war, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan flew to Moscow to negotiate with Putin over the fate of Batumi, if a full Russian invasion was on cards. Any insights over this?

All I can say about that is that no one really knew what Turkey would do, what Erdogan's goal was, but Turkish troops were mobilised [near the border] and that is why the Russians did not try to take Batumi.

Were you disappointed with how the US responded to the conflict?

A: I think America was responsible a little bit late but when it did, it was quite proper. The only thing which was disappointing little bit later was defence secretary Robert Gates basically saying we won't use military force and that's when the Russians took Akhgori. Basically Russia took Akhgori after one phrase of Gates, he was really disgustingly cynical and was against our integration into NATO, he sabotaged our

military training, was one of the initiators of the military embargo and so on. He told me when I met him at the Munich security conference, he was sitting next to me at the dinner, he said, 'Well I really don't think getting you into NATO is a good idea but our president wants it so what can I do?' Then later there was a CIA meeting when Bush was saying what are our military options, Cheney said, 'Let's employ cruise missiles' and Gates said, 'No way.' If it had not been Gates but Rumsfeld, I think they would have used that option.

What do you think your biggest mistake was?

I should have screamed much more. When I look back... I thought maybe Crimea at last would make the world realize what happened in 2008. I had a conversation with John McCain - we gave our intercepts exclusively to the New York Times and they published a front-page article about the Russians invading prior to seventh - and then I called McCain, I said, 'John, it's a solid proof that we didn't start the war.' And he said, 'Look Misha, I'm a military pilot, you don't need to tell me that; I know that tanks generally don't fly, especially the Russian ones.'

That doesn't sound like a mistake, more a regret.

We defied the existing world order in our part of the world. We were - well, maybe it's about me - I should have not put too much trust in the West, perhaps, but it was our value-based approach. I was quite naïve about the West - I thought they always practice what they say, they practice what they preach, they believe in their own principles.

What do you think is your and your government's legacy when it comes to the 2008 war?

We stood up to the Russians, the state did not collapse, we held up four years under the tremendous pressure of various much bigger powers than we even imagined back then. When you look back what kind of resources were involved, what kind of front was running against us, we were in fact holding up very well.

Location: Georgia

Topic: Crisis
Conflict

Focus: From the Borderland to the
Steppes

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