

## **Russo-Georgian War Of Words Escalates Over Border**

**Author:** [Sozar Subeliani](#)

Russian accusations that Georgia is aiding and abetting Chechen militants through its frontier with the breakaway republic have pushed this local "cold war" dangerously close to boiling point.

The Russian-Georgian frontier runs through Chechnya for 81 highly mountainous kilometres. Due to the nature of the terrain there are few crossing points and in the winter, especially after heavy snowfalls, the border becomes practically impassable.

Russian politicians, military and information agencies insist, however, that 'boeviks' (fighters) and weapons are reaching Chechen rebels across the border from Georgia and that Georgia is serving as a gateway to the outside world. Tbilisi have categorically denied these accusations. The Russian media has reported, however, that Russia has presented the Georgian Ambassador, Malkhaz Kakabadze, with documents confirming these accusations. Kakabadze denies this.

According to data provided by Georgia's Department of State Border Guards, more than 3,192 Chechens crossed the border between September 15 and November 10. These were mostly women, children and the elderly. Border guards have been given strict orders not to allow any male of fighting age into the country.

How strictly this order is applied, however, is another issue. Earlier this month, a Georgian driver showed Radio Liberty journalist, Andrei Babitski, a brand new Toyota Land Cruiser which was stuck in mud after leaving the road near the Georgian border village of Shatili.

The passengers were Chechen men travelling to Turkey for talks. The Khists - Georgian based Chechens living in the Pankisi Gorge, spoke of occasions where they had helped Chechen militants cross the border. Similar information was allegedly provided to journalists on the "New 7 Days" weekly newspaper in Khevsuretia.

The paper, which has sent journalists to the border on several occasions since the summer has published reports alleging Chechen militants cross the border using paths and occasionally even checkpoints, smuggling weapons and drugs and bribing the local law enforcement officers.

If true, it is likely that the numbers-both of people and weaponry-is small and bear very little relation to the exaggerated claims emanating from the Russian military. While the border is not sufficiently well guarded to prevent single 'boeviks' or even small armed units from crossing the border, no large scale movements would be possible without the Georgian government's knowledge and consent.

General Valeri Manilov, first deputy Head of the Russian General Military Headquarters, recently claimed that "the Russian military possess information that militants continue to be supplied with money and weapons via the Georgian and the Azeri borders.

In the near future 1,500 small, armed units of hired fighters are scheduled for transfer into Russia". Manilov expressed his exasperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan for their failure to join with Russia in the fight against "international terrorism".

Politicians in Georgia believe that Russia is deliberately spreading "false" information in order to create a negative image of Georgia and Azerbaijan, drag them into a wider war so as to retain their dominant position in the region.

Recent events at a Moscow airport seem to support this view. On November 12, the Russian authorities impounded military aid (uniforms and footwear) sent by the U.S. government to the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, claiming these goods were destined for Chechnya via Georgia. The US issued an official confirmation that the cargo was a part of its aid package to Georgia, but the Russians refuse to return the goods.

Again on November 20, another consignment of military hardware--dummy samples of equipment for show--was impounded at Moscow airport while en route back to Georgia from a military exhibition held in Bucharest last month. Bizarrely, Russia claimed these were combat goods destined for Chechen rebels.

There is growing concern in Georgia, spread by the media here, that Russia now poses a real military threat. On November 12, "New 7 days" quoted high level claims that Russian Military Headquarters has worked out plans for a number of military operations into Georgia.

The allegations come from Revaz Adamia MP, who is both a member of Georgia's Security Council and chairman of the parliamentary Committee of Defence and Security.

According to Adamia, the first alleged plan includes air strikes on Chechens refugees in the Pankisi Gorge and the Khist villages. The second presupposes sending ground troops to Shatili. At the same time, Russian combat units will invade Georgia's northeast region from North Ossetia, Ingushetia and Daghestan, through the mountainous regions where the border is not clearly defined.

The third variant allegedly involves all-out air strikes across Georgia targeting refugees, the Chechen representative's office in Tbilisi, railway stations and airports from where, according to Russia, "terrorists enter and leave Georgia to and from Chechnya".

MP Mamuka Areshidze also mentioned a possible threat in the newspaper "Morning Paper" on November 16. "Russia's headquarters plan to create pseudo-Chechen bases here in Georgia and bomb them later," Areshidze claimed.

The very next day, November 17, three Russian military helicopters violated Georgian air space and bombed the surroundings of Mutso, Shatili and Giorgitsminda using the unguided "SS-8" (NURS) missiles. Three Russian aircraft violated Georgian air space again on November 18. Russia has violated Georgian airspace on no less than 10 occasions in the last 2 months.

Moreover, three months ago, on August 9, during Russia's brief Daghestan campaign against Chechen militants, Russian SU-25 aircraft bombed the surroundings of the Georgian villages, Omalo and Qoshalo, dropping in excess of 4,000 high explosive fougasse shells. Due to the heavy snow, Georgian anti-mine troops were unable to find all of them and approximately 1800 shells remain live.

Initially Russia denied the attack took place, but following an investigation by a joint commission, the Russian authorities admitted liability and claiming the pilots responsible had deserted, afraid to bomb territory over Daghestan occupied by Chechen rebels and dropping their bombs over Omalo instead. The Russians have subsequently apologised.

Moscow freely admits, however, that its planes are patrolling the border. According to General Colonel Vitali Pavlov, pilots are mining the paths that lead across. On November 17, the Deputy Head of the Russian Military Headquarters, claimed that three army helicopters were "working" on the Russian side of border where around 40 guerrilla tents had been spotted.

Keen to keep the public on side, Russia claimed these actions were part of an operation to trace police Major General, Genadi Shpigun, who was kidnapped on March 5 and was reportedly being held by Chechen militants in Shatili. Following an investigation, the Department of State Border Guards of Georgia announced on November 24 that Shpigun was not in Georgia.

In spite of all the accusations and counter claims, the bombing of mountains surrounding Shatili on the eve of Istanbul summit is still very difficult to understand. The Chairman of the Department of State Border Guards of Georgia, General Valeri Ckheidze, suspects that its aim was to cover up other activities by the Russian secret service.

This supposition has tempted some analysts into making a connection with reports that troops from the Russian 'Alpha' special combat unit first showed up on exercises at the Vaziani Russian military base outside Tbilisi and subsequently disappeared on the eve of the OSCE summit in Istanbul, complete with their guided anti-tank missiles, sniper guns and laser sights. This however, remains total speculation.

The actual result of the Shatili bombing has been the fortification of the border there. Defences have been put up by Georgian border guards with participation of internal military forces and units from the Ministry of Defence. Meanwhile, an order has gone out to target and open fire on any object found violating Georgian air space.

On November 24, the Chief of Russia's Department of Border Guards, Colonel-General Konstantin Totski, announced that Georgian border services will from this Friday onwards, allow Russian border guards to periodically "familiarise" themselves with the situation at Georgian checkpoints bordering Chechnya. "So far we still haven't succeeded in establishing more active cooperation in controlling the illegal paths along which guerrillas and weapons pass into Chechnya," said Totski adding that he was hopeful this would soon change.

Georgian sources claim that while the agreement will allow for cooperation and information exchanges between operative groups along both sides of the frontier, Tbilisi could not agree to Russia's wish to joint controls on the Georgian-Chechen border.

Furthermore, despite a direct appeal from Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Georgian President Eduard Sheverdnadze again refused permission for Russian armed forces to enter Chechnya from Georgia. The Russians are eager to block the Chechen militants from the south and secure control of strategic heights in southern Chechnya.

Russo-Georgian relations at present can at best be described as "frosty" and despite, the thick snows, this mountainous border region could heat up at any moment.

Sozar Subeliani is the editor of Georgia's Kavkasioni newspaper.

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