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The South Ossetia Conflict: Collision of Georgian and Russian Interests

By **Dr Tracey C German**

This article focuses on the deterioration of relations between Georgia and Russia over the secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia's separatist conflicts are far more than domestic territorial disputes: they have both regional and international implications, and represent one of the principal obstacles to the development of Georgian-Russian relations. As military skirmishes have threatened to escalate, jeopardizing stability in the volatile Caucasus region, President Mikheil Saakashvili's desire to resolve these protracted conflicts has become symbolic of his vigorous approach to tackling Georgia's more intractable problems.

politique étrangère

As the Soviet Union unravelled at the beginning of the 1990s, several of Georgia's myriad ethnic groups intensified their calls for self-determination. War broke out in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both of which have existed as *de facto* independent states for over a decade. The hand of its powerful northern neighbour has been visible in Georgia's separatist conflicts, as Moscow seeks to maintain political leverage over the South Caucasian state, and Tbilisi has frequently accused Russia of seeking to undermine Georgian sovereignty by supporting separatist provinces.

At the end of May 2004, buoyed by his success in Ajaria, Saakashvili offered South Ossetia and Abkhazia 'special status' within Georgia, proposing the creation of a federal state containing republics with considerable autonomy. Of the two, South Ossetia was perceived to be the region that would be the most willing to compromise and make concessions with Tbilisi.

Saakashvili's desire to consolidate Georgia's territorial integrity has pushed the country towards renewed conflict with Russia, which not only has a peacekeeping contingent in South Ossetia, but also provides tacit support for the separatist region. Hopes of a peaceful resolution to the

long-running conflict in South Ossetia faded rapidly with a sharp increase in tension and fears re-emerged of armed confrontation between Russian and Georgian troops, stationed in the separatist region as peacekeepers. Consequently, the Georgian leader has cautioned that in the event of large-scale armed conflict erupting in South Ossetia it would be an issue of bilateral Georgian-Russian relations, not merely an internal conflict¹.

Relations between Tbilisi and Moscow have been characterised by tension and mutual mistrust, since Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The South Caucasian state has sought to maintain an autonomous and pragmatic foreign policy that removes it from the Russian sphere of influence and the new leadership in Georgia has been inclined to seek the engagement of external actors such as the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the US, demonstrating its desire to integrate with the West. This has upset Moscow, which is unhappy with its southern neighbour's European leanings and rewarding relationship with Washington, particularly the growing US military influence in the South Caucasus.²

President Vladimir Putin has insisted that Moscow will continue trying to influence affairs in former Soviet states. However, far from enabling Moscow to retain influence, its manipulation of events in regions such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia have hastened Georgia's move towards the West, strengthening its desire to join organisations such as Nato and reduce the leverage that Russia has.

South Ossetia is not seeking to become an independent state. Rather, it is calling for reunification with fellow Ossetians in the Russian republic of North Ossetia-Alania, across the international border in the North Caucasus. Russian is the region's official language, the Russian rouble is the official currency and in February 2004 the South Ossetian leader, Eduard Kokoity, proclaimed that 95% of the republic's population of approximately 100,000 had adopted Russian citizenship. In what is perceived as evidence of Russian interference in Georgia's internal affairs, there is a special regime in place for ethnic Ossetians, as well as Abkhazians and Ajarians, to claim Russian citizenship, thereby bypassing the usual

1. BBC Monitoring (online version), 9.9.05, *Imedi TV, Tbilisi, 1602GMT, 9.9.05*.

2. Georgia has witnessed a veritable flood of assistance from the US: financial support for Georgia to date totals over US\$1bn, making Georgians the second biggest *per capita* recipients of American aid after the Israelis.

lengthy application process.³ As Georgia does not permit dual citizenship, this means that a significant part of the country's northern border area is outside of Tbilisi's control and populated by people holding 'foreign' citizenship.

With the majority of the South Ossetian population claiming Russian citizenship, Moscow is able to cite concerns for the security of its citizens as a possible motive for escalation of the conflict. The Russian authorities did precisely that in July 2004 with a statement that Moscow 'will not remain indifferent towards the fate of its citizens, which compromise the absolute majority of South Ossetia.'⁴ Andrei Kokoshin, head of the Duma committee on CIS affairs, has affirmed that Russia 'will not stay aloof' if Georgia resorts to force, stating that 'many residents of South Ossetia are citizens of Russia and Russia has the right to defend the life, freedom, property and health of its citizens using all means available to a state in modern circumstances'.⁵

The Roots of the Conflict

David Darchiashvili argues that Ossetian and Abkhaz separatism is not the result of a 'Russian plot', but of a 'process of 'awakening' in these ethnic groups, which was distinct from the Georgian 'rebirth''.⁶ Ossetians are a people of Iranian origin, who arrived in Georgia during the 13th century and are currently spread between the Georgian region of South Ossetia and the republic of North Ossetia-Alania in Russia's North Caucasus. Under Soviet rule, South Ossetia was an autonomous region within the Georgian SSR, while North Ossetia was an autonomous republic (ASSR) within the Russian SSR. South Ossetia has traditionally been suspicious of the Georgian state, fearing what is perceived as Georgian 'chauvinism' that threatens a loss of ethnic identity. The idea of uniting the two Ossetias emerged during the national revival movement at the end of the 1980s when the renewed upsurge in Georgian nationalism during Mikhail

3. These peoples are keen to acquire Russian passports, as their refusal to acknowledge Georgian statehood means they do not hold Georgian passports and hence are unable to travel beyond the country's borders. Abkhazians and South Ossetians are also excluded from the visa regime Russia imposed on Georgian citizens in December 2000, a move described by the European parliament as the 'de facto annexation of Georgian territory.' *Visa requirements between Russia and Georgia*, text adopted by European Parliament 18.1.01 – <http://www2.europarl.eu.int/omk/sipade2?PUBREF=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P5-TA-2001-0037+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&LEVEL=3&NAV=X>.

4. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Statement 'V svyazi s obostreniem situatsii vokrug Yuzhnoi Osetii' 9.7.04 – http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/sps/3C8799FB6DC16167C3256ECC0045352E

5. BBC Monitoring (online version), 4.8.05, *RTR Russia TV, Moscow, 1300GMT, 4.8.05*.

6. David Darchiashvili, 'Georgian security problems and policies' in Dov Lynch (ed.), 'The South Caucasus: a challenge for the EU', *Chailot Papers No 65*, December 2003 (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2003), p.115.

Gorbachev's era of *perestroika* increased inter-ethnic tensions within the Soviet republic. It should be noted that there has never been great support for reunification amongst North Ossetians, who are concerned about further instability in their own republic, particularly in the wake of the Beslan siege, and the economic implications of such a move.⁷

On 20 September 1990 the communist authorities of South Ossetia declared the formation of the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic, a constituent part of the USSR, and the secession of this new entity from Georgia. However, ethnic Georgians living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia began to voice discontent with what they perceived to be anti-Georgian policies in these regions and in October 1990 Zviad Gamsakhurdia became leader of the Georgian Supreme Soviet, predominantly on the basis of his support for the rights of Georgians. Gamsakhurdia stripped South Ossetia of its autonomy and introduced a state of emergency, escalating Ossetian demands for reunification with North Ossetia into full-scale violence.⁸ Armed skirmishes broke out, leading to full-scale war in the spring of 1991. The election of Eduard Shevardnadze as Georgian president in March 1992, encouraged the two sides to seek a more conciliatory stance and on 24 June 1992 the Dagomys peace agreement was signed, prompting the deployment within the conflict zone of a Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) that comprised three 'national' battalions from Georgia, South Ossetia and Russia. A quadripartite negotiating body, the Joint Control Commission (JCC), was also established to foster political reconciliation between the various sides. It includes representatives from Georgia, South Ossetia, Russia, North Ossetia-Alania and the OSCE.⁹

Despite a lasting ceasefire, a political settlement of the dispute has remained elusive and the separatist authorities remain in control of the majority of the region's territory, with the exception of several Georgian enclaves. The situation had looked relatively promising towards the end of the 1990s with signs that the two communities were seeking to normalise

7. See Gadzhiev, p. 162.

8. Gamsakhurdia openly promoted the cleansing of Ossetians from the country. Following attempts by Tbilisi in August 1989 to make Georgian the country's sole official language, the authorities in South Ossetia (where reportedly only 14% of Ossetians spoke Georgian) ruled that Ossetian was to be the region's sole language. On 19 January 1991 South Ossetia held a referendum in which reportedly over 90% of the population voted to become part of Russia, although the results were never recognised by Georgia. See Cornell, pp. 162-169. See also, Julian Birch, 'Ossetia: a Caucasian Bosnia in microcosm' *Central Asian Survey* (1995), 14 (1), pp. 43-74.

9. The EU has participated since April 2001. The OSCE (then CSCE) established a mission in Georgia on 6 November 1992. For further information see Farian Sabahi & Daniel Warner (eds.), *The OSCE and the Multiple Challenges of Transition*. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004)

relations and refugees were beginning to return home.¹⁰ However, the lack of a political resolution means that the republic exists beyond Tbilisi's control and, without international recognition, has become heavily reliant upon criminal sources of income.

The renewal of confrontation between Georgia, South Ossetia and Russia was triggered by Saakashvili's determination to tackle problems that went unresolved during the Shevardnadze era. In May 2004 the Georgian authorities set up a series of checkpoints to stem the flow of goods to the Ergneti market in South Ossetia, a major trading centre for smuggled goods. According to the Georgian authorities, these police checkpoints were so successful that the South Ossetian leadership 'felt that their main source of income, that is contraband, was under threat.'¹¹ In accordance with the 1992 peace accords, checkpoints can only be established within the conflict zone with the permission of the JCC, permission that Georgia had not sought. Thus the commander of the Russian peacekeeping troops in the region, General Svyatoslav Nabzdorov, threatened to dismantle the checkpoints, prompting a stand-off between Russian peacekeepers and 300 Georgian Interior Ministry troops, sent to defend the posts.

The deployment of Interior Ministry troops provoked fears amongst the local population that Georgia was seeking to resolve the political stalemate by military means. Whilst the Georgian prime minister Zurab Zhvania sought to reassure them that the decision to send troops to the region did not amount to an attack, he warned that 'no-one should even think about stopping us establishing order on our territory, in Georgia.'¹² This did little to appease suspicions.

In a televised address, Saakashvili assured Ossetians that Georgia only intended to re-assert its control over the region by peaceful means, stating that the political status of the region should be decided through negotiations rather than force. In an attempt to reinforce the legitimacy of his peaceful intentions, Saakashvili proposed restoring the vital rail link between the region's capital Tskhinvali and the rest of Georgia, distributing pensions from the state budget to the region's population, the provision of a free ambulance service for the Tskhinvali population and the

10. See Dov Lynch, 'A regional insecurity dynamic' in Dov Lynch (ed.), 'The South Caucasus: a challenge for the EU', *Chaillot Papers No 65*, December 2003 (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2003), p. 20.

11. Statement by Vano Merabishvili, Secretary of Georgia's Security Council, BBC Monitoring Select Central Asia and Transcaucasus, 31.5.04, pp. 13-4, *Georgian State Television Channel 1*, Tbilisi, 1500GMT, 31.5.04.

12. BBC Monitoring Select Central Asia and Transcaucasus, 31.5.04, p. 11, *Imedi TV*, Tbilisi, 0900GMT, 31.5.04.

distribution of free agricultural fertilisers.¹³ In a further shrewd move, the Georgian president announced that the regional television station would begin broadcasting a news service in the Ossetian language.

However, these measures would have been far more successful if it had been able to impose a complete blockade on goods coming across the Russian border, as South Ossetia is totally dependent upon external assistance. Thus, the package of 'soft' measures was backed up by a steely warning from Saakashvili: 'The disintegration of Georgia will not take place. This is the end of a fragmented Georgia.'¹⁴

War of Words

The stand-off between Russian and Georgian troops over the police checkpoints in May 2004 triggered a war of words between Moscow and Tbilisi, pushing them towards further confrontation. The Russian Foreign Ministry released a statement that stressed the fundamental importance of the South Ossetian issue to Moscow, asserting that Tbilisi's 'strong-arm actions...do nothing to help the development of Russian-Georgian relations'. A second strongly worded statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on 1 June went further, warning that Tbilisi's 'provocative steps' might lead to 'extremely negative consequences'.¹⁵ Georgia's Foreign Ministry responded to these statements by issuing a reminder that 'the matter concerns the territory of Georgia which is a sovereign state'.¹⁶ Notwithstanding official Tbilisi's assurances of its peaceable intentions, Kokoity continued to take an antagonistic stance and appealed to the Russian Duma to recognise South Ossetia as an independent state and take measures to protect the region's population.¹⁷

13. The Georgian president observed that 'our fellow citizens of Ossetian origin have been creating the wealth of our nation together with other citizens of Georgia. Today they are in an unfair position as they are unable to receive pensions they are entitled to as residents of Georgia.' BBC Monitoring Select Central Asia and Transcaucasus, 31.5.04, p. 14, *Georgian State Television Channel 1*, Tbilisi, 1614GMT, 31.5.04.

14. BBC Monitoring Select Central Asia and Transcaucasus, 31.5.04, p. 14, *Georgian State Television Channel 1*, Tbilisi, 1614GMT, 31.5.04. For a Russian view of Georgia's new 'peacekeeping' model, see *Novyie Izvestiya*, 17.6.04, pp. 1-4.

15. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Statement, 1.6.04 – http://www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/sps/E389EB4B3E33A4EFC3256EA6005C1C61. The Foreign Ministry was also highly critical of Tbilisi for apparently using troops trained under the US GTEP programme in South Ossetia. This statement was followed on 2 June by a statement from the Russian Duma, condemning the Georgian build-up of force in South Ossetia, and a week later Russia's Federation Council also issued a statement expressing concern over rising tension in the region and calling for restraint.

16. BBC Monitoring Select Central Asia and Transcaucasus, 2.6.04, p. 19, *Kavkazia-Press news agency*, Tbilisi, 0929GMT, 2.6.04.

17. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (internet version), 11.6.04 http://www.ng.ru/cis/2004-06-11/5_duma.html

Kokoity's unwillingness to compromise and engage in dialogue was amply demonstrated during the summer of 2004. In response to what he described as Georgia's 'aggressive policy' the South Ossetian leader declared a suspension of all relations with Tbilisi, stating that the region would maintain contact with Georgian officials only within the framework of the JCC. He said that relations would be resumed only once Georgia had compensated South Ossetia 'for the damage done by the aggression at the start of the 1990s', estimating this to be worth over US\$1bn (R34bn). He also demanded an apology and acknowledgement from the Georgian parliament for 'the genocide of the South Ossetian people during the 1989-1991 period'.¹⁸ However, the following day the South Ossetian leader appeared to temper his uncompromising tone in a rare interview on Georgian television, when he urged Tbilisi to engage in dialogue. South Ossetia is not Georgia's enemy'.¹⁹

Tensions between Georgia and Russia escalated further when 38 Georgian peacekeepers were seized by armed militia in the South Ossetian village of Vanati in July 2004. The Georgian parliament released a statement on the situation in South Ossetia urging Russia 'to make a choice between adherence to civilised norms and supporting separatism, dictatorship and criminals' and reiterating the peaceful intentions of the Georgian authorities with a pledge that the 'cultural, economic and social interests of ethnic Ossetian citizens will always be fully protected in the united Georgia'.²⁰ Saakashvili accused a group of Russian politicians 'suffering from sick neo-imperialistic ambitions' of endeavouring to deepen the conflict in South Ossetia. " We want normal and good relations with Russia... Russia is an important partner for us, but we cannot let ourselves be in a position of an ostrich."²¹ Having endured Russian pressure for years, the Georgian leadership is aware that it has the political backing of the US and other Western nations and is thus feeling far more secure of its position. This support was demonstrated when the US Secretary of State Colin Powell initiated telephone contact with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov to discuss the rising tension in South Ossetia and to urge restraint to avoid an armed conflict. According to a statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry regarding the telephone call, both sides affirmed

18. BBC Monitoring Select Central Asia and Transcaucasus, 11.6.04, p. 21, *Interfax news agency*, Moscow, 1621GMT, 11.6.04.

19. BBC Monitoring Select Central Asia and Transcaucasus, 12.6.04, p. 14, *Imedi TV*, Tbilisi, 1200GMT, 12.6.04.

20. Statement by the Bureau of the Georgian Parliament, 9 July 2004, Tbilisi, http://www.parliament.ge/statements/2004/state_09.07.04.htm.

21. BBC Monitoring Select Central Asia and Transcaucasus, 10.7.04, pp. 19-21, *Rustavi-2 TV*, Tbilisi, 1100GMT, 10.7.04.

their commitment to the principle of support for Georgia's territorial integrity without resorting to force.²²

Despite Saakashvili's strong words, Georgia refrained from any retaliatory action. However, the Georgian leader threatened to abandon the 1992 ceasefire agreement when Russia began moving armoured vehicles into South Ossetia, ostensibly as part of a scheduled rotation of armaments for the Russian peacekeepers deployed in the region.²³ Speaking in Ajaria, the president made ominous remarks: 'If the Georgian flag cannot be raised in the Tskhinvali region within the framework of existing agreements that were signed by Shevardnadze, I am prepared to denounce those agreements.'

Russia warned that any attempt to withdraw from the 1992 peace agreement could trigger a renewal of armed conflict in the region, a sentiment echoed by Kokoity and his 'foreign' minister Murad Jioyev. Georgian officials sought to assuage these fears that war was imminent, stating that Saakashvili's words did not mean a rejection of all agreements and that maybe a new peace treaty could be signed to replace the Dagomys accords.²⁴

The threat of war was diminished when Georgia removed the majority of its peacekeepers from the region at the end of 2004 and in April 2005 the Georgian peacekeeping contingent in South Ossetia was reduced further, so that it numbered 25, provoking warnings of chaos and instability in the region. Georgia's new defence minister Irakli Okruashvili defended the move, stating that he had made the decision partly to counter claims he is a 'hawk' and 'warmonger' only interested in provoking conflict in South Ossetia. The death of Georgian prime minister Zurab Zhvania in February 2005 had cast a shadow over relations with South Ossetia, prompting fears that the 'hawks' were in the ascendant.²⁵ This view had been encouraged by the cabinet reshuffle conducted in December 2004, which saw

22. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 9.7.04, http://www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/sps/47E02D2D527049E7C3256ECC004D3E7B

23. 44 armoured vehicles, including 22 BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles and 18 BTR-70 armoured personnel carriers, were sent to the region, allegedly for the South Ossetian battalion of the Joint Peacekeeping Force. They were intended to replace 40 armoured vehicles, which had been in the conflict zone since 1992 and were being sent for repairs to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia. Russia vehemently denied that Georgia had not been informed about the armament rotation.

24. Georgia's deputy security minister Georgy Ugulava attempted to ease tensions by suggesting a revision of the 1992 agreement, which in his opinion no longer reflects reality: *Novyie Izvestiya*, 26.7.04, p. 4.

25. For analysis of the implications of Zhvania's death see C W Blandy, 'Georgia: the Death of Zurab Zhvania. "A Setback for President, Government & Country"' *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, February 2005. (Camberley: 2005)

Okruashvili move from the post of Interior Minister to become Defence Minister. Okruashvili was born in Tskhinvali and has expressed his support for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity.²⁶ The change on Georgia's domestic political scene did little to facilitate a peaceful resolution of the conflict with South Ossetia and the region has become increasingly militarised during the latter half of 2005. Saakashvili's attempts to regain control of South Ossetia have stalled and Tbilisi is no nearer achieving its objective of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. Amid continuing skirmishes between armed groups in the region, the threat of violent conflict involving Georgian, Russian and South Ossetian troops remains very real.

One of the principal obstacles to an agreement between Russia and Georgia is the issue of border monitoring at the Roki Pass. Tbilisi has demanded the creation of a joint Russian-Georgian checkpoint at the Pass, which contains a tunnel, through which the Transcaucasian highway travels. This is the sole road linking South Ossetia with Russia, and Georgian officials believe that a joint checkpoint will help prevent the smuggling it alleges is facilitated by the lack of controls.²⁷ Georgian concerns over the pass have been compared to Russian fears over the Chechen sector of the Russian-Georgian border: when Moscow became increasingly frustrated that Chechen guerrillas were able to escape by crossing the massive Caucasus mountain range Georgia agreed to Russian calls for joint control of this section of the border.²⁸ In contrast to this co-operation, Moscow has remained intransigent over the issue of joint monitoring of the Roki Pass and the issue has been largely ignored, although Georgian officials have continued to call for expanded OSCE monitoring of the region.

Another stumbling block to a peaceful resolution of the conflict is the lack of direct dialogue between Tbilisi and the South Ossetian authorities. According to the Georgian authorities, most of the key security positions in Tskhinvali are occupied by ex – or current Russian officials. Givi Targamadze, the chairman of Georgia's parliamentary Defence and Security Committee, has described talks with South Ossetia as 'pointless' because 'the key posts in Tskhinvali are directly appointed by Russia', while the local authorities have no influence. There were no official

26. Irakli Okruashvili, 'Georgia: Security Challenges and Opportunities', Statesman's Forum, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 16 June 2005.

27. For further details of the alleged contraband that travels between North and South Ossetia, see *Novyie Izvestiya*, 1.7.04, pp. 1-4.

28. Tensions flared between Russia and Georgia at the end of 2004 when Moscow refused to extend the OSCE border monitoring mandate, which covered Georgia's border with the Chechen, Ingush and Dagestani republics. The mandate expired at midnight on 31 December 2004.

representatives from either South Ossetia or Russia at a peace conference held in Batumi in July 2005, at which Saakashvili unveiled new proposals to resolve the conflict.

Moscow plays a crucial role, both in keeping the conflicts alive and in moderating tensions. Unable to stop itself meddling in what it still considers to be its own backyard, Russian officials hold periodic meetings with the leaders of Georgia's separatist regions and in September 2005 hosted a conference of self-proclaimed republics, the so-called Commonwealth of Unrecognised States, which included representatives from South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transdnistr. This tacit recognition by a major world power encourages the separatists. South Ossetian officials have rejected a series of peace proposals put forward by Tbilisi, which offered considerable autonomy, on the basis that the region is already independent and agreeing to a deal would essentially represent a step backwards.

International Connections

Since the renewal of hostilities the Georgian leadership has consistently called for greater regional and international involvement, and in July 2004 talks were held in Tskhinvali, attended by representatives from Georgia, Russia, the OSCE, European Commission and UN. Tbilisi is seeking international monitoring of the situation in South Ossetia to independently establish the quantity of weapons and armed formations in the region in order to put an end to unsubstantiated rumours that merely served to inflame the tense situation further.

In an attempt to weaken Russian influence in the Caucasus, Tbilisi has sought to use international fora such as the UN and OSCE. Saakashvili reiterated his commitment to a peaceful resolution of Georgia's unresolved separatist conflicts in a speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2004. Proposing a new three-stage programme designed to facilitate their settlement, he underlined his determination to resolve these conflicts, observing that such 'black holes' are 'incompatible with progress, development and lasting stability'²⁹ The Georgian president also called for increased co-operation between Georgia and Russia and an end to double standards, an oblique reference to Russian support for separatist groups in Georgia.³⁰

29. *Remarks on the Occasion of the 59th Session of the UN General Assembly*, Mikheil Saakashvili – President of Georgia, September 21 2004 – www.un.org/webcast/ga/59/statements/geoeng040921.pdf, pp. 6-10.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Georgian-Russian relations were the focus of a Georgian-led debate at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in October 2004, when Nino Burjanadze, Georgia's parliamentary chairperson, once again accused Russia of double standards, supporting separatist groups in Georgia whilst suppressing them in Chechnya. On 14 October, the European Parliament adopted a resolution 'deploring the recent statements of the Russian authorities about the use of pre-emptive strikes in the South Caucasus'.³¹ Saakashvili made further use of PACE in January 2005 to accuse Russia of hampering efforts to resolve the protracted regional dispute. He also outlined a new peace plan (which included guaranteed language rights, and control over education, policing and social policies), offering the region constitutional guarantees of broad autonomy within a federal Georgia, an offer rejected by South Ossetia on the basis that it is already 'independent'.

Georgia has sought to engage both the EU and US in the search for a resolution to its long-running conflict with South Ossetia. During his visit in May 2005, US President George W Bush called for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity to be respected and lent his support to Saakashvili's plans for South Ossetia and Abkhazia to become autonomous and self-governing, but not independent. In the wake of the crisis in international relations following the controversial operation in Iraq, the Bush administration has been seeking to shore up its relationship with new allies in the pivotal Caucasus and Caspian region. Georgia occupies a key strategic location, between Europe, the former Soviet Union and the Middle East. Furthermore, Tbilisi is very keen to protect its political autonomy from the influence of its powerful northern neighbour. Thus, the US has a compliant ally in an area of vital geostrategic and economic importance, whilst Georgia benefits from considerable amounts of aid, be it financial, military or political.

In contrast to the US, EU relations with Georgia, and the Caucasus region as a whole, are tentative. Nevertheless, it has included the South Caucasus in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a reversal of previous policy that shunned engagement with the region. Although the ENP does not offer potential membership of the EU, it does offer a 'privileged relationship' with the aim of sharing the Union's stability and prosperity. This is a noble objective, but there has been little tangible progress made in furthering relations with any of the South Caucasus states. In spite of the

31. Text adopted at the sitting of the European Parliament, Thursday 14 October 2004 – <http://www2.europarl.eu.int/omk/sipade2?PUBREF=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+20041014+SIT+DOC+PDF+V0//EN&LEVEL=3&NAV=X>

European Commission recommending the 'significant intensification' of relations through the development of an Action Plan, the inclusion of these countries into the ENP has yet to translate into substantive programmes.³² In May 2003, outgoing Nato General-Secretary Lord Robertson described the Caucasus region as an 'area of crucial importance to [Nato's] common security', describing the countries of the Caucasus as 'front-line states' against the threats of terrorism, proliferation and regional instability³³. The region is also growing in terms of its importance to the economic security of the West. Around 25% of the new oil onto international markets in 2006 is expected to be from the Caspian region, a target that will be facilitated largely by the commissioning of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) export pipeline, which began pumping its first oil in May 2005. Georgia is perceived to be the weakest link in this transit infrastructure.

Georgian efforts to move towards the West have unsettled Moscow. In September 2005 the Russian Foreign Ministry warned that the supply of armaments to Georgia by Nato member-states could destabilise the whole of the Caucasus region, strengthening Tbilisi's desire to resolve its territorial disputes by force.³⁴ In spite of Georgian criticism of Russian involvement, it is important to take into account the crucial moderating role that Russia plays in the Caucasus region as a whole. Its stabilising influence and substantial presence cannot be ignored. Russia played a decisive part in averting bloodshed during Georgia's 'Rose revolution' of November 2003, becoming involved in the impasse surrounding Shevardnadze's position as president and also remains the key economic power in the country.³⁵

Conclusions & Implications

Saakashvili is pursuing a high-risk strategy: by making the restoration of the country's territorial integrity his first priority and seeking to resolve long-running separatist disputes, he risks undermining his own political position if he fails to achieve this. He declared his determination to tackle the issue of South Ossetia right at the beginning of his presidency, perhaps in an attempt to demonstrate his leadership credentials and intention of following a more dynamic path than his predecessor. Although he has

32. *Country Strategy Paper 2003-2006. Tacis National Indicative Programme 2004-2006. Georgia.* Adopted by the European Commission on 23 September 2003.

33. Speech by Lord Robertson delivered at the French University, Yerevan, Armenia on 15 May 2003, www.nato.int/docu/speech/2003/s030515a.htm.

34. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 13.9.05, http://www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/sps/FEC8CB5B3B3C7D9CC325707B003BFC99.

35. In the summer of 2003 Russian electricity monopoly UES acquired Georgia's principal power distributor, ironically from American power company AES. A deal with Russian gas giant Gazprom for the provision of natural gas to the country also proved highly controversial, as the country is wholly dependent on imports of Russian gas.

consistently denied that Tbilisi is planning a military campaign against South Ossetia, he may be left with little choice if attempts to resolve the dispute by political and economic means fails. In what may turn out to be a very prescient statement, the chairman of Georgia's parliamentary Defence and Security Committee has affirmed that Tbilisi should continue seeking a negotiated settlement, but he would not rule out the possibility that 'the crisis will become more acute this autumn, and that the peak of the conflict will be reached in the spring [of 2006]', two years after Saakashvili announced his intention to reintegrate South Ossetia back into Georgia.³⁶

While a renewed offensive appears an unlikely prospect, if Saakashvili were to decide that the military is in a position to resolve the political stalemate by force, the ensuing conflict could spell disaster for the volatile South Caucasus and may necessitate the deployment of international peacekeepers or peacemakers, together with a substantial humanitarian aid package and forces to protect energy infrastructure in the region. Resolving the situation by military means also raises the possibility of further confrontation with Russia, the dominant economic and military power in the region. Moscow's position with regard to Tbilisi's separatist problems is ambiguous: whilst it supports Georgia's territorial integrity, it has yet to publicly reject South Ossetian demands to become part of the Russian Federation. However, if Moscow really wanted to incorporate South Ossetia then it could already have achieved this.

In the wake of the agreement between Moscow and Tbilisi in 2005 regarding the closure of Russian military bases on Georgian territory, there was hope that this positive momentum could be harnessed to resolve other major sticking points in the bilateral relationship, notably the issues of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, there is some doubt as to whether Russia is genuinely interested in facilitating the resolution of these conflicts, as this would deprive it of leverage over Tbilisi. It could be argued that the Russian approach is short-sighted for whilst it may benefit in the short-term from political leverage over its southern neighbour by providing support for Georgia's separatist groups, in the longer term such intervention is only going to lead to further instability in the Caucasus. Moscow will gain far more from encouraging the development of a stable country on its volatile southern border and co-operating with Tbilisi to tackle transnational problems such as drugs and weapons trafficking. On the other hand, an unstable Georgia is a lot less attractive to the West in

36. BBC Monitoring (online version), 15.9.05, *Alia newspaper, Tbilisi*, 15.9.05.

terms of investment and political partnership, and would enable Moscow to retain its dominant influence in the region.

The conflict has implications not only for stability within Georgia and the Caucasus region, but also for Europe and the wider international community, and there is a need for greater international involvement, particularly on the part of organisations such as the OSCE and EU. The numerous unresolved conflicts within the South Caucasus can no longer be regarded as issues that are extraneous to European security. As the borders of organisations such as the EU and Nato edge further eastwards, and Western interest in the region grows with its importance as a transit route for Caspian hydrocarbons, greater attention needs to be paid to security on the periphery. The presence of unresolved conflicts such as South Ossetia undermine the stability of the Caucasus region, not just because of the threat of a renewal of fighting, but because they have created 'black holes' outwith government control, providing ideal conditions for security challenges such as terrorism, organised crime and illegal trafficking to flourish.

Mikheil Saakashvili faces an uphill struggle to re-integrate South Ossetia back into the Georgian fold. Although he is determined to engage the separatist region in dialogue about its political status, Kokoity has no incentive to participate in negotiations whilst he has the security of Russian backing. Superficially, the South Ossetian conflict is a dispute between the authorities in Tbilisi and separatists. However, it has become a battleground between Georgia and Russia, with the former seeking to maintain its territorial integrity and sovereignty in the face of persistent interference by the latter.

