Two Years After the August War: Its Nature and Results

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There are two ways to describe the war that briefly shook the world (or did it fail to shake it?) in August 2008. On the one hand, this was a war between Russia and Georgia because of the West (or NATO, which in this context is the same): Russia wanted to drag Georgia away from the West and force it to return to Russia's fold. On the other hand, this was a war between Russia and the West for Georgia: its aim was to convince the West that there exists such a thing as Russia's exclusive zone of influence, which has to be respected.

I recognize that these are not the only two ways, or even the two most accepted ways to interpret the war. It is still widely debatable who started it, who was motivated by what, who played what role, and exactly how wrong different players were. The diplomatically balanced report from the EU mission led by Heidi Tagliavini did not close the debate. It only supplied new data for the supporters of different points of view. I am not going to enter that debate here. When it comes to the nature of the conflict and motivation of main players, I am mainly in concord with Ronald D. Asmus and his book *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, which is, I believe, the best analysis of the war available so far.

I will just assume that the first paragraph of this essay is accurate in describing the nature or the war and will focus on its outcome. Most serious analysts (including Asmus) agree that all three mentioned parties lost the war, and I agree with that assessment. But there are different degrees and modalities of defeat and now, almost two years after the war, it is far from clear who lost or (maybe) gained what. I will propose some comments on that topic.

To be sure, the Abkhazians and South Ossetians were parties to the war in their own right, and it is generally unfair not to consider their perspective. It was for them that things changed most dramatically – although the logic of uncertainty of the outcome also applies to these territories and peoples. However, in this brief note I will focus on the outcome of the war for those who I believe were the major players.

The Russian-Georgian War

I will start with the outcome of the war between Georgia and Russia. It is beyond doubt that Georgia lost in a traditional military sense. Its army was overpowered by the enemy, and it had to concede control over certain territory, in particular three pieces of land it had controlled before the war: a swath of villages in the middle of South Ossetia; the Akhalgori district, which had not been part of South Ossetia in any real sense since the break-up of the Soviet Union; and Kodori Valley in Abkhazia. While before the war Georgia failed to control about fifteen percent of its internationally recognized territory, now we speak about twenty percent. With

this came evident humanitarian and economic losses: human casualties, burnt villages, a new wave of IDPs, destroyed or damaged military equipment and civilian infrastructure, and fleeing investors.

Those are extremely painful losses for a small country. Given, however, what had been really at stake in this war, this not enough to define its principal outcome. It is difficult to believe that Russia invaded Georgia to establish control over the aforementioned parts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These served as a pretext for the war. Russia failed to achieve its main aim: to "take Georgia away" from the West and put it under Russian influence. Contrary to many expectations, Georgia still has the same government and pursues largely the same political course. Given the obvious inequality of power and resources between Georgia and Russia, Georgia got away relatively unscathed.

This is not to downplay the losses that Georgia suffered beyond conceding control over parts of its territory. Economically, the greatest problem is scared investors. However, this effect was soon overshadowed by the impact of the global financial crisis. Now, almost two years, later Georgia's economic losses are not greater than damages suffered during the same period by fully peaceful countries. Of course, this was largely due to generous post-war assistance packages that Georgia got from the US and European Union – although, as we know from the history of international assistance, aid packages do not always work and cannot explain everything. Now, there are signs of economic recovery and the return of foreign investors. This is slow and shaky, but this is so everywhere.

Even more importantly, the war was expected to undermine credibility of President Saakashvili's government at home. He lost the war, which he himself – at least that was a widely held perception – recklessly started. No national elections were to be held until 2012, but given propensity of Georgians to changing governments by revolutionary means, many in the West as well as in Russia expected that there would be a new wave of domestic protests that would bring the government down. It was also remembered that Saakashvili barely survived when people took to the streets in the fall of 2007.

Now we know the outcome. The war did not undermine Saakashvili's standing with his own people. Georgian society had been polarized before the war, and remained so in much the same way afterward, but the balance of people's power even changed somewhat in favor of government. Is it not natural that a people rally around its government in the face of a foreign threat? The street offensive of the opposition in the spring and summer of 2009 was far from sufficient to oust the government; instead, it undermined credibility of the opposition. May 2010 municipal elections brought resounding victory to the incumbent United National Movement Party (UNM) and – while general level of fairness of political competition in the country leaves much to be desired – the quality of elections was higher than usual. It did not lead either Georgian society or international observers to question the validity of the results. Arguably, Saakashvili's government is now even more stable than before the war.

It is not at issue here whether Mikheil Saakashvili and the UNM indeed constitute the best choice for Georgia. That is and should be open for debate. But

another unconstitutional change of power would severely undermine Georgia's fledgling institutions. In the aftermath of the war with Russia, it would also be considered Russia's victory: successfully causing the regime to change in Georgia (albeit indirectly), which had allegedly been its agenda in the first place. Moreover, Saakashvili – whatever his faults might be – epitomizes Georgia's policy of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The opposition, on the other hand, is a motley crew of different groups that had been united by nothing but hatred for the incumbent government. Some of them support the general national project of becoming part of the West; others are not so sure. Nobody knows which way the country would turn if the radical opposition prevailed. All this makes consolidation of Saakashvili's power a significant defeat for Russia.

Last but not least, there is an issue of Georgia's international standing. The Russian political elite does not hide that it wants to go to bed with Georgia without any third party present. For Georgia, on the other hand, support of the West in relations with Russia is of existential importance. If Russia and Georgia are left to settle their relations one on one, Georgia will have to accept Russia's terms. The balance of power is obvious. It is only logical to presume that severing the link between Georgia and the West, or, to put it in other terms, achieving Georgia's international isolation, was Russia's principal aim in the war.

What is the outcome in this sense? Saakashvili's government certainly suffered losses on the international scene with regard to its credibility. Most Western politicians and the public now believe that Saakashvili is to blame for starting the war, with Russia guilty of 'overreacting'. While, as I said, the EU-commissioned Tagliavini report leaves space for different attributions of guilt, it did not resolutely reject this initial assessment; rather, many believe it to be vindicated. This, it is frequently said, has cost Georgia important degree of its international support. For instance, the number of high-level meetings to which President Saakashvili got invitations was reduced. His meeting with President Sarkozy of France in early June 2010 was the first official summit with a major Western leader in which Saakashvili participated since the immediate aftermath of the war. Most importantly, President Obama's administration appears to trust Saakashvili much less than that of President Bush did.

But does this amount to 'international isolation'? Hardly. It is often opined that the war closed NATO's door to Georgia. Wrong: Postponing Georgia's membership indefinitely while opening NATO's door on the level of general commitment was the decision of NATO Bucharest summit in April. Asmus' book makes a convincing argument that ambiguity of a decision taken in Bucharest in April might have been one of the reasons for the Russian-Georgian war five months later. If there is a causal link between NATO policies and the war, it may be other way round: the "creative ambiguity" of the Bucharest decision could have enhanced the probability of the war. The latter did reinforce Western fears that had prevented it from taking the decision of giving a Membership Action Plan to Georgia in the first place, but the problem had been there before.

I will return to the topic of western attitudes towards Georgia when discussing the outcome of the war between Russia and the West. First, I will summarize that between Russia and Georgia. Paradoxically, the war did not change much in Georgia

beyond consolidating Russia's territorial and military control over the separatist territories (not that I want to underestimate this particular issue). Georgia is still a struggling country led by a strongly pro-Western government. It still suffers from important democratic deficits, but is still a "beacon of democracy" by regional standards (not that Georgians themselves are or should be satisfied with this level of democracy). Its overarching national goal, supported by a large majority of its public, is to join the West, while the latter combines a cautious welcome with trying to keep Georgia at arm's length. The war did not change that. Therefore, Russia did not succeed in defeating Georgia.

The Conflict between Russia and the West

The war in August was also Russia's war against the West that Russia still considers its primary adversary – although it is not popular in Western capitals to recognize this fact. Who won in August?

In this much more important war, the stake was the philosophy on which the world order shall be founded. After the break-up of communism and the end of the bi-polar world, the principles on which international relations were to be founded were never clear; however, the West, more frequently and vaguely referred to as "the international community", tried to enforce an order that took into account the balance of power between nations and other players, but was also based on institutions and norms rather than respect for sheer force. Advancing the values and institutions of democracy, plus a gradual enlargement of the area of democratic peace were important parts of this strategy. The decade of the enlargement of NATO and European Union suggested that the power of institutions and norms in international relations was on the increase. For small and fledgling countries like Georgia, this trend constituted the main hope of genuine sovereignty, that is, effective opportunity to make its own choices over fundamental ways of its development within limits suggested by those institutions and norms.

Russia openly resented this advancement, not only because it threatened the position of not-quite-democratic rulers like Putin, but also (and more importantly) because it made Russia feel inferior. To the extent that international order is based on norms and institutions, Russia can only be a secondary power. Russia is not the only nation that carries that resentment against the moral, norm-setting power of the West; these countries believe that all the high-minded rhetoric of democratic peace and human rights is nothing but a hypocritical ploy of the West to increase its international domination, and it has to be resisted by any means available. But Russia is the closest such country to Europe, and it constitutes a natural border with the enlarging area of democratic peace. It is also important that not long time ago Russia (then known as Soviet Union) was the principal challenger of the democratic West, and its effective ruler, Vladimir Putin, represents institutional memory and continuity of that policy.

Georgia became a test case in this adversity. The test question to assess the outcome of the August war between Russia and the West would be, was the West pushed to rethink its strategy of gradually advancing the new rules of international

relations (whereby even small nations can make their own decisions), or did it learn the lesson that whether or not Russia's claims are justified, they should be respected just because Russia is a big and powerful country.

In general, the latter outcome would suggest that international order would move in the direction of a new 'multipolar world' or global concert of nations dominated by the contest among great-power nationalisms such as Russian, Chinese, Indian, Turkish, Iranian, Brazilian, you name it. The US and the EU would only participate in this concert as important but not dominating (that is, norm-setting) players. In such a world, it is only reasonable and legitimate for major players to claim exclusive zones of influence; on the other hand, small countries like Georgia would have to revert to an old-fashioned game of balancing between different would-be hegemons, or becoming client of the most powerful one. In Georgia's case, those would be Russia, Turkey, maybe also Iran, the US, or other European powers. But that would be based purely on pragmatic considerations of survival, not choices about norms and institutions.

How did the war influence that? There is no simple answer here. In a way, Russia succeeded. Instead of looking for ways to push Russia to honoring the demands of international law – at least, comply with the Sarkozy-Medvedev agreement, imperfect as it may be – many Western politicians and think tankers rushed to consider how had the West wronged Russia in such a way that it came to express such rage, and how Russia could be appeased in order to prevent such outbursts of rage in future. Russian leaders can legitimately claim that not only did Russia get away with what it did in August, but forced the West to respect its interests more than before.

But again, the reality is not simple. Conciliatory gestures towards Russia are balanced by other moves. In the aftermath of the war, and in acknowledgement of problems created by it, EU created the Eastern Partnership, a new instrument which is often criticized for not being specific enough, but bears a clear message: Russia's neighborhood is also Europe's, and Russia cannot claim any exclusivity of influence. In the particular case of Georgia, the process of rapprochement actually sped up. The visa facilitation agreement is signed, and negotiations over the association agreement were formally launched in July.

Obama came under scathing criticism domestically for failing to develop any coherent policy towards the South Caucasus and neglecting traditional allies such as Georgia and Azerbaijan. In particular, the administration was attacked for the phrase about "Georgia no longer being considered an impediment" for future agreements with Russia. This was perceived as a sign that Georgia was shortchanged for the policy of the "reset" with Russia. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's tour of six countries in July 2010 was specifically tailored to counter that criticism and demonstrate that the US is not scared to challenge Russia in the region that the latter considers its backyard. On the issue of Georgia, the Obama administration switched to much tougher language, characterizing Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia an "illegal occupation". This is only a word, critics say. But some words are more potent than others, and responsible leaders of democratic powers are not easily allowed to backtrack on the words they use.

To sum up, the August war did indeed shake the West (even if it tries to downplay the effect) and its responses towards Russia have been ambiguous and inconsistent. This may be a ground for legitimate criticism, though it is also fair to recognize the objective complexity of the problem. One cannot just ostracize Russia without generally damaging the international order, and Western leverage over Russia is limited. However, so far the test case of Georgia does not suggest that the West has accepted Russia's claims to its exclusive control in its neighborhood, and some Western countries have taken some steps to counter those claims. Therefore, so far the outcome of the August war between Russia and the West may be considered a draw.