



CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

briefing note

WHAT DOES THE WAR IN GEORGIA MEAN FOR EU FOREIGN POLICY?

By Tomas Valasek

The war in Georgia divided the European Union instead of uniting it. Some member-states condemned Russia and gave (non-military) aid to the Georgian government; others accused Tbilisi of provoking the war. Their reactions suggest that EU capitals make different assumptions about Moscow's goals and intentions towards countries on Russia's borders, and about Europe's interests in these countries. These differences will thwart Europe's attempts to craft a common Russia policy. But they should not prevent Europe from re-thinking the EU's policy towards its eastern neighbourhood. In response to the war in Georgia, the EU should take a more active role in defusing 'frozen' conflicts in Eastern Europe, and it should accelerate the integration of countries between the EU and Russia into the European Union.

The six-day war began on August 7th with a Georgian artillery attack on Tskhinvali, the capital of the breakaway Georgian province of South Ossetia. The attack killed a large number of civilians as well as several Russian peacekeepers, prompting Russia to invade Georgia and push its forces out of South Ossetia. Russian forces also entered another breakaway province, Abkhazia, occupied several towns in Georgia proper, and briefly appeared to threaten the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. A French-brokered ceasefire ended fighting on August 12th. At the time of writing, Russian forces remain in the separatist territories, with some stationed on the Georgian side of the provincial boundary, in the towns of Gori and Poti.

EU member-states gave varied responses to the crisis. France, the holder of the rotating EU presidency, refused to condemn either side. Similarly, the German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said that Europe should be "an honest broker".

Other countries were happy to point fingers but disagreed on who was to blame. The Slovak prime minister Róbert Fico, alluding to the August 7th Georgian artillery attack on South Ossetia, said that "we all know very well who provoked the war". Most other states which were willing to finger a culprit blamed Russia. Poland issued a statement criticising "Putin's imperialistic and revisionist" intervention. Britain's Gordon Brown condemned Russia's "continued aggression". And the Swedish foreign minister, Carl Bildt, labelled the Russian military action "the gravest breach of the commitments of the Council of Europe".

During the war, the EU governments developed sufficient consensus to pursue a two-pronged policy. They made strong statements discouraging Russia from expanding the war beyond South Ossetia (with partial success: as noted above Russian forces also entered Abkhazia and parts of Georgia proper). More successfully, French president Nicolas Sarkozy in his capacity as the holder of the EU's rotating presidency brokered the cease-fire agreement that halted the fighting. The French president is continuing to talk to both sides about the exact terms for peace.

These are important achievements. Europe's first priority during the war was to end the fighting. The EU's balanced policy towards the conflict enables it to play a mediating role; and so far Sarkozy has played that role with some success.

“Honest broker” no more?

But should the EU remain neutral in the long run? Georgia has declared its interest in joining the European Union and NATO, and it has undertaken economic and military reforms to boost its chances of membership. Georgia is also hosting a pipeline, which has helped Europe diversify its energy sources away from Russia, thus increasing the energy security of EU member-states. And Georgia sent troops to the (mostly European) mission in Kosovo as well as to Afghanistan. So the war is a setback for Europe: a weakened Georgia means that the EU will have a less effective partner in the South Caucasus.

Georgia got into trouble partly because of its pro-Western leaning. Russia has been angered by Tbilisi's attempts to join NATO and by Georgia's role as a transit point for Caspian oil to Europe that avoids Russia. In recent years, Russia has consistently sought to undermine the government of Mikheil Saakashvili. In the separatist provinces, Moscow abandoned the role of neutral broker. It gave away thousands of Russian passports to residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (who, under international law, are citizens of Georgia). And in April this year, Russia passed a law authorising direct contacts with the self-declared capitals of both provinces. This worried the Georgians that outright recognition or annexation would be next. In May, Russia increased its peacekeeping contingent in Abkhazia in apparent violation of the peacekeeping agreement with Tbilisi. And Russian planes entered Georgia several times, occasionally firing rockets at various targets.

Poland, Estonia and others have concluded from this that Russia had engineered the war in order to punish Georgia for its pro-Western leanings. The truth is more complicated. The immediate cause of the war was Georgia's ill-judged attack on Tskhinvali, a city full of civilians. Tbilisi's harsh treatment of its ethnic minorities is also responsible for encouraging separatism. And Saakashvili should have known that his attack on South Ossetia would draw a Russian response. Whether provoked or not, the president made a serious miscalculation and bears responsibility for its tragic consequences. Equally, however, there is little doubt that Russia has sought to fuel tensions between Tbilisi and its breakaway provinces. It was complicit in creating conditions that led to the war.

To a number of the member-states, this means that the EU and NATO need to show clear support for Georgia, and to sanction Russia. They have taken the initiative – the Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian leaders flew to Tbilisi on August 12th to stand alongside Saakashvili. The Polish government also offered Tbilisi the use of its internet servers (Georgia's having been attacked by hackers, presumably from Russia).

Officially, the EU clings to its ‘neutral broker’ position, and the communiqué from the August 13th EU summit on Georgia refused to blame either side. It is right not to have done so: in the short run, the EU should focus on mediating between Georgia and Russia, and this requires it to remain neutral. The cease-fire is fragile, low-scale fighting continues, and there seems to be no common ground between Georgia and Russia on the big political questions: who should administer the breakaway provinces in the future? Whose forces should maintain peace in South Ossetia and Abkhazia? And who should lead the negotiations regarding the province's political status? Until the risk of renewed warfare has receded, the EU should not do anything that undermines its neutrality and hence its ability to mediate between the two sides. The governments that have taken Georgia's side in the conflict, too, should understand that the EU's most effective way of helping Tbilisi right now lies in negotiating an end to the war, which will prevent the far stronger Russian side from gaining even more Georgian ground.

In the longer run, however, the EU should move beyond mediating duties. It has an interest in preventing war in countries on the EU's eastern borders. So it needs to find ways to resolve the remaining ‘frozen’ conflicts in Europe, and to discourage both Russia and the neighbourhood countries from reckless behaviour. As argued below, the EU will find it difficult to craft a common response to Russia; most ideas floated to date – like attempts to ‘punish’ Russia by boycotting the Sochi Olympics – will not work. But this does not mean that the EU should do nothing. Europe's best response lies in increasing its assistance to countries of Eastern Europe, and in directing EU aid at projects that reduce the region's vulnerability to Russian pressure.

Little hope of common policy on Russia

Germany, France and other like-minded countries say that what Moscow really dislikes is not Western influence in general but US military presence in its backyard. They point out that Russian criticism focuses on NATO enlargement and US missile defence plans. Russia is less critical of the European Union – and when it is, it tends to single out the new member-states. So Berlin and Paris assume that Europe – at least its western parts – can have a good relationship with Russia even under Putin's newly assertive foreign

policy. This in turn requires NATO to refrain from enlarging to Georgia and Ukraine and for Europe to keep engaging Russia economically and politically.

The Czechs, Poles and other like-minded states think that Russia wants to control the foreign policies and economies of its neighbours. They point to Putin's statements, in which he described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the 'one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century', and assume that Moscow is on a quest to roll back Western influence in the former Soviet space. To them, Georgia is simply the first domino. Russia has also questioned the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Most of the new member-states argue that if the EU does not side with Georgia in the war, Russia will move to re-assert control over all its former satellites.

These differing assumptions have coloured EU member-states' responses to the war in Georgia. Countries in the 'Russia as revisionist' camp argue that the EU should in effect punish Moscow. Estonian president Thomas Ilves called for a suspension of the EU-Russia partnership talks, under way since June 2008 (as did the British foreign minister David Miliband). The Lithuanian foreign ministry said the EU should halt its assistance to Moscow and cancel talks on simplifying applications for EU visas. This sounds vindictive but Vilnius or Tallinn hope to deter Moscow from using military force in the future to assert control over its neighbours.

Germany, France and others disagree. They say that it would be unfair to single out Moscow because Georgia has started the war. They no doubt agree with Warsaw or Prague that Russia has not acted in good faith over the frozen conflict zones in Georgia, but assume – or rather hope - that Moscow is principally interested in opposing US, rather than European, influence. Crucially, as noted earlier, they believe that this threat is not so grave as to justify any sort of retaliation from the EU.

These differences kept the EU from saying anything substantive on Russia at its August 13th extraordinary crisis meeting. This is probably just as well.

Attempts to 'punish' Russia will neither end the hostilities in Georgia, nor help avoid another war in Eastern Europe. Relations between Russia and the EU have become increasingly strained in recent years. Russia has issued a number of threats to individual EU countries; for example, to target Poland and the Czech Republic with nuclear missiles if they agreed to host US missile defence installations. Should the EU start making threats to Russia, Moscow would match those threats and even up the ante.

The EU has been right not to copy Russia's aggressive tone. It should stick to that approach; all the more so because Russia is now even less inclined to respond positively to any EU threats. The Georgia war and the Western reaction to it has left Moscow feeling aggrieved. Some policy-makers believe this war was a Western trap to tarnish Russia's reputation: the US and others encouraged Georgia to attack South Ossetia so that Russia would either be portrayed as weak (if it did not respond) or as aggressive (if it did). So Moscow would dismiss any EU threats as absurd hypocrisy.

Moreover, in the short term the EU's leverage is limited. It has some influence: Russia is not a rogue state; it wants to be an accepted member of the international community, and it wants the EU and NATO to treat it as a privileged partner. It worries what the world thinks of it. Already, some Russian foreign policy commentators are deploring the damage the war has inflicted on Russia's international standing. Moscow would have noticed that the group of the world's largest economies, G8, held telephone conversations about the Georgia war without involving Moscow, which considers itself a part of the club. This step – and broader worries about Russia's global reputation – is probably a part of the reason why Moscow called off the war after five days

Moscow's desire for recognition as a member of the 'civilized' international community allows the EU to play on Russian sensitivities about its role and status in the world. But this influence is subtle, and cannot be turned on and off to suit the needs of individual crises. It stems from what Europe is (a respected, rich community) rather than what it does. The most the EU can do is to make Russia feel excluded, like when some European countries took part in G8 talks, which did not involve Moscow. But the threat of exclusion should be used with caution. For example, the EU is right not to have threatened the boycott of the Sochi Olympics in 2014, as some have proposed. Few of the EU governments now in power will still be in office in six years, and none can make promises on behalf of subsequent administrations. Russia knows this, so the threat would only have undermined the credibility of the G8 track.

Revitalise the EU's eastern policy

Europe's response to the war in Georgia should focus not on Russia but on the countries between Russia and the EU. The EU needs to revitalise its policy towards the eastern neighbourhood. That would be the most effective way of stabilising the former communist countries and preventing another war in Europe.

The EU's interest in the eastern neighbourhood boils down to two things: Eastern Europe should be free from conflict, and it should be anchored to the West – that is, bound in a tight institutional and economic relationship with it; one close enough to discourage irresponsible politics and that enriches both sides by facilitating mutual trade.

The EU can accomplish both those goals without getting into divisive battles over punishing Russia. It should make two changes to its policy towards the eastern neighbourhood.

First, it should take a lot more active role in defusing potential conflicts in Eastern Europe (as Sweden, Poland and the Czech Republic proposed in their strategy papers in early 2008). Ukraine should be the immediate focus of EU attention. Like Georgia, Ukraine wants to join the EU and NATO. It is equally vulnerable to Russian pressure. Moscow has troops on Ukrainian territory (the Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol) and parts of Ukraine, particularly Crimea, are more loyal to Moscow than Kyiv.

In recent times, Russia has begun to exploit both these issues in order to deter Ukraine from pursuing NATO membership. The current Ukrainian government wants the Russian fleet to leave, and earlier this year it sent Moscow a detailed timetable for withdrawal. However, the Russian President, Medvedev, criticised Kyiv's position on Sevastopol as "inadequate". On 6th June 2008, the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said that the Ukrainian demands were 'unworthy of a friend' and pointed out that the 1997 treaty allowed for the Sevastopol lease 'to be extended'.

Ukraine fears that if and when it moves closer to NATO, Russia will use its military presence in Crimea, and the pro-Moscow leanings of the local population, to break up Ukraine. This may be what Vladimir Putin had in mind when he said in April 2008 that Ukraine's 'fragility' would cause it to 'disintegrate' if the country joined NATO (he could have also been referring to opposition to NATO membership, which expands beyond Crimea and is particularly strong in the country's east). Others in Ukraine explicitly threatened a break-up. The leader of the Crimean communist party, Leonid Grach, threatened to support the peninsula's secession from Ukraine if it joined NATO. Three-quarters of Sevastopol are ethnic Russians, whose livelihood currently depends on the fleet and who, when forced to choose, may well support Moscow over Kyiv.

Europe has a strong interest in preventing a conflict on its borders. It should act to reduce Ukraine's vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia. For example, the EU could encourage Kyiv to offer a credible alternative source of income to the hundreds of thousands in Crimea, whose livelihood depends on the Sevastopol base. The port will need another use after the Russian fleet leaves. It should become a commercial hub for Ukraine's booming, export-driven economy, but as things stand, land connections to the rest of Ukraine are poor. So the EU should finance improved road and rail links between Crimea and the rest of the country, so as to prepare Sevastopol for its future role as a commercial port. Without an economic alternative for the Russian fleet, the tens of thousands of Crimeans whose livelihood depends on the fleet will be easy prey to Russian scaremongering.

There may be other ways for the EU to help reduce Ukraine's vulnerability to Russia. For example, it may be able to finance news channels that would provide an alternative to Russian TV, which serves as the main source of news to Ukrainians in the country's east. The initiative for these and all other steps would need to come from the Ukrainian government. But the EU should make it clear to Kyiv that it would be ready to support its efforts to prevent conflict in Crimea.

Second, Europe should speed up its efforts to integrate Ukraine as well as other neighbouring countries into the European Union. EU enlargement was a good idea before the war in Georgia, and the conflict has only underlined its importance.

The EU has strong reasons to discourage its neighbours from acting recklessly. That is one of the lessons of the war in Georgia. Whether provoked or not, Mikhail Saakashvili acted irresponsibly. He misjudged Russia's resolve and the West's willingness to help Georgia. Tbilisi's actions on August 7th gave Russia the pretext it needed to launch an invasion.

The most effective way for the EU to moderate this sort of behaviour in future is to emphasise that such destabilising actions will undermine the prospects for eventual EU (and NATO) membership. Unfortunately, as things stand, this threat is not credible because Ukraine, Moldova and other countries in the neighbourhood do not think that the EU is seriously planning to accept them. Germany, France, Austria, The Netherlands and a few other countries are very reluctant to expand the EU further.

These countries should be told by their colleagues that ‘enlargement fatigue’ is damaging Europe’s ability to stabilise its neighbourhood. The EU needs to exercise more influence in Eastern Europe if it wants the region’s governments to take European security interests into account in their dealings with Russia.

The EU should begin by putting Ukraine on a track to accession. The EU and Ukraine have been negotiating a new partnership and co-operation agreement, and are scheduled to hold a summit on September 8th. At this meeting, the EU should send a strong signal that Ukraine will be welcome to join the EU once it meets the accession criteria. And the EU should speed up the negotiations of the partnership agreement and broaden its assistance to Ukraine (more visas, more scholarships).

A new relationship with Russia

Some European countries will resist these suggestions on the grounds that Russia will view them as provocative. They should take a more strategic view. The rationale for closer integration with Ukraine is not anti-Russian, but to enable it – and other countries in similar situations – to prevent ethnic conflict on its territory. Europe as a whole, including Russia, benefits if the common neighbourhood remains peaceful and stable.

It is likely – particularly after the war in Georgia – that Russia will oppose any moves that could lessen its leverage over Ukraine, such as the withdrawal of the Sevastopol fleet. But the EU should be willing to run the risk of annoying Moscow when its own vital interests are at stake.

Countries deep inside EU borders should be reminded that they benefited greatly when the EU and NATO brought in Poland, the Czech Republic and other former communist countries. Germany, Austria and others ceased to be border states; they stopped worrying about instability in their immediate neighbourhood. The frontline member-states, which now represent EU’s borders, have the same legitimate need for stability.



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