

# From the Caucasus to the Balkans - an unstable world order

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## Contents

- [Kosovo is not Ossetia, they](#)
- [The societies behind the \(...\)](#)
- [The uncertainties of a warlike](#)
- [Small states and great powers](#)

Moscow's decision to bombard Georgia and the way it recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have "borrowed" from Washington both in the methods employed and in the discourse – something that the defenders of double standards do not want to accept, repeating endlessly that Kosovo is not Ossetia. But there is nothing to celebrate: even if Putin is helping a multipolar world to assert itself, no progressive alternative is emerging.

The offensive launched against South Ossetia on August 7 by Georgian president Mikhail Saakachchvili is generally described, at the very least, as a blunder – because of the crushing Russian military victory. However, according to the Canadian researcher Michel Chossudovsky, "it is obvious that the Georgian attack of last August 7 in South Ossetia had been carefully planned". He reminds us, indeed, that "the attacks against South Ossetia occurred one week after the United States and Georgia finished their imposing military exercises (held from 15 to 31 July, 2008). The attacks were also preceded by important summit meetings organized under the aegis of the GUAM [Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldavia], a regional military alliance sponsored by the United States and NATO", which met at the beginning of July. Its strategic objective is the "protection" of the energy routes that circumvent Russia in order to weaken it.

The links established between the Georgian leader and the United States, in particular since the "Rose Revolution" of 2003 which brought him to power, and the proven presence of United States (and Israeli) military forces in Georgia do indeed rule out the idea that the offensive of Tbilisi was not known about in Washington... The prospect of Georgia and the Ukraine joining NATO, although the question was postponed at the recent summit meeting of the Alliance in April, and is due to be discussed again in December, would further accentuate the loss of power of Russia in a moribund Community of Independent States (CIS) where the United States no longer hesitates to intervene directly. Except that, in this instance, Washington obviously did not choose to become involved on the terrain of military confrontation. The defeat inflicted on the Georgian Army obviously damages the credibility of its military-political support to it. The only immediate military effect of the Russian offensive was the recall of Georgian troops mobilized in Iraq so that they could defend their country (with 2000 soldiers, Georgia is the third military occupying force in Iraq, after the United States and the Britain)... The Georgian attempt to retake control of South Ossetia by force on August 7, 2008, upset an unstable equilibrium. The riposte by Moscow, whose troops have been present, in particular within the "forces of interposition", recognized by the United Nations, since the conflicts of the 1990s, went well beyond the control of these areas. It marks a turning-point in its ability to

defend its great power ambitions vis-à-vis its “near neighbours”, concerning in particular the control of the energy routes.

### **Kosovo is not Ossetia, they repeat interminably, in a logic of double standards**

The contortions that are made in order to say that the bombardments by Moscow and the recognition of the independence of Ossetia and Abkhazia don't have anything in common with the (humanitarian?) “strikes” by NATO and the recognition of the independence of Kosovo are painful to behold, whatever the obvious differences, generally exaggerated by what were the dominant media stereotypes. In reality, we should on the contrary take time to reconsider, with a game of mirrors, the comparison between the Balkan and Caucasian conflicts. We would see at work there, essentially, obvious double standards, concerning many common points.

The USSR was not Yugoslavia. But here and there the decomposition of the social system and the federation produced bloody conflicts, in places where minority communities were trapped within new “unitary” nation-states which used the dominant role of the ethnic-national majority to control a territory and its wealth. And in the absence of such a majority, Bosnia-Herzegovina was subjected to a terrifying dismemberment by its neighbours...

In the recent conflict, Moscow has “borrowed” from Washington its discourse and its methods - without having, obviously, the strength of a world imperialism -, with similarities that go further than many people would care to admit or remember... One and the other power claimed to protect (and in fact manipulated for their own ends) the peoples who were threatened by the emergence of new independent states, making short shrift of “international law”. But it is as false for the one as for the other to affirm that the independence of their respective “protégés”, was the basic, obvious and initial choice. This choice - no matter what one thinks of the methods used - comes from the populations concerned, in Kosovo as in Ossetia or Abkhazia. It was not inevitable, but due to the policies of domination inflicted on the peoples concerned. But the proclamation and then the recognition of independence, for the Albanians of Kosovo as for the South Ossetians, is not yet sovereignty and even less wellbeing. In both cases, they will be confronted with their powerful protectors...

The scenarios were not the same, but the substance is close. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, autonomous regions of Georgia, saw their statute called into question by Tbilisi at the time of the independence of Georgia at the beginning of the 1990s - as Kosovo saw its status called into question by Belgrade (as also did the Serbs in Croatia by their regression to the status of a threatened minority). But the West backed the “democrat” Yeltsin, keeping silent about his dirty war in Chechnya. (The Chechens and Kosovo only benefited from a statute of autonomy, and did not belong to the cases where the right of self-determination was recognized. But Belgrade never conducted in Kosovo the kind of dirty war that there was in Chechnya...) Boris Yeltsin did not recognize the independence proclaimed by Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the abolition of their statutes by the Georgian government in 1992. But in the framework of the freezing of the conflict, the UN and the OSCE gave him full powers to include his armed forces within the “forces of interposition” in these secessionist regions, after extremely violent confrontations in 1991-1993 left several thousand dead and hundreds of thousands of refugees.

Moscow exploited these conflicts in order to establish its own bases, at the demand of the Abkhazians (Muslims representing less than 20% of the population the territory of their self-proclaimed republic, which experienced a vast ethnic cleansing of non-Abkhazians) and of the Ossetians (Orthodox Christians speaking a language close to Persian). But although it made the

choice of legitimising and giving practical support to the separatist forces, it never supported the project of unification of the (North and South) Ossetians. And like Washington in Kosovo until recently, Moscow was quite satisfied with the freezing of the conflict, without recognizing the independence of the secessionist republics, but with its troops present on the ground with the approval of the UN: such a posture enabled it to present itself as a defender of frontiers and of international law alongside Belgrade, against the independence of Kosovo in February 2008...

Did Moscow set a trap Tbilisi by "letting it believe" that it was choosing the cause of Belgrade against that of Ossetia? This is at least a zone of uncertainty concerning Russia's choice. In the same way, the US military staffs were far from being unanimous on the appropriateness of the Georgian offensive, which they were not ready to support militarily. That leaves a possible ambiguity in the "signals" received in Tbilisi, leaving a quite considerable degree of autonomous decision to the Georgian leader: it is because he himself was confronted with an increasing contestation of his regime, and was undoubtedly convinced of Western and in particular US support (after the military exercises in July) faced with a *fait accompli*, that Mikhail Saakashvili sought by this crusade against the secessionist regions, to regain a little popularity.

### **The societies behind the geo-strategy**

We have to go back to what is generally passed over in silence in the commentaries centred on the geo-strategic stakes: what is happening on the social and societal level... It was already the combination of a "unitary" and racist policy against the autonomous regions with the galloping corruption of the regime of Shevardnadze (an ex-Communist who was in power in the newly independent state) which was the internal background to the "Rose Revolution" of 2003. That the opposition (as in the other "coloured revolutions" - and the one, without colour, in Belgrade in 2000) was massively financed by the CIA with the help of a pro-Western discourse, does not at all detract from the role played by real popular mobilizations in these pseudo-revolutions. However the aspect they had of being superficial and manipulated from outside, explains the fact that the corruption of the new "parvenus" was in every case on a massive scale, reinforced by the clientelist policies of privatization. So the "democrats", a term used to designate those whom the western powers support, were nowhere really solidly established...

Eduard Shevardnadze had been obliged to accept the Russian presence in the separatist regions - because, it was said, it had been legitimated by the UN and the OSCE... But the rise of a strong regime in Moscow with Putin in the new millennium and Russia's re-found economic growth since 1998 inflected the choices of Washington: the separatist regions were the Trojan horse of Moscow in this strategic zone where the oil and gas pipelines circumventing Russia were to pass... Mikhail Saakashvili obtained openings in exchange for sending Georgian troops to Iraq. But that did not give him internal legitimacy. The elections of November 2007, where probable fraud was backed up by repression, remain disputed by the opposition.

The complications of the tensions with the secessionist regions and Moscow were accompanied by the reinforcement of the links with the United States in the context of recurring politico-financial scandals and - since 2004 - an accentuation of the neo-liberal course: privatization of more than 1800 enterprises between 2004 and 2008, with projects of extending this logic towards the universities and the health sector... As everywhere (and as in Russia, in particular where the same type of social policies are being implemented) the great mass of the population finds itself losing out. To attenuate dissatisfaction, the Georgian regime (there again, as in Moscow, with other means...) sought to regain popularity by rushing into a warmongering and nationalist course ... A careful examination of the Georgian political scene after this fiasco will undoubtedly be the source of a

reversal of alliances - as after the coloured revolutions of Ukraine and elsewhere...

## **The uncertainties of a warlike and socially regressive world order**

Moscow declares its indifference to the retaliatory measures that are being threatened - the current crisis of the WTO and the IMF, the United States bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, visible divisions among the member states of the EU over the independence of Kosovo and the integration of the Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, give it room for manoeuvre to push forward its strategic aims: to neutralize Georgia, to block the projects of oil and gas routes circumventing Russia, to advance the pawns of the Russian multinationals in the Caucasus (as is being done in the Balkans), to use the energy weapon to influence the policy options of the countries that are dependent on Russian resources and supply routes.

But the offensive of Moscow can also stiffen against it a certain number of governments (concerning among other things the enlargement of NATO or the recognition of Kosovo).

And Russia has also lost out where Washington has been able to make progress on the points blocking its strategy of "security": the United States did in fact exploit the Russian offensive to exert pressure on the Polish government which - like that of the Czech Republic -, was confronted with strong popular opposition to the presence of US anti-missile shields directed clearly against Russia. The pact which has just been signed in Warsaw (often compared to the episode of the Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962...) could have disastrous consequences "for Europe and for the entire planet", says William Engdahl [1].

At the same time, the attempt by Washington to counterpose to the Russia-Armenia-Iran axis a Georgia-Azerbaijan-Turkey axis is far from being consolidated: Azerbaijan, in particular, seeking to placate Moscow (and to keep, after the bloody conflict of 1988-1994, High-Karabagh with its Armenian majority) is not a candidate for NATO membership. It is the only country able to transport its oil to European markets by circumventing Russia via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyan pipeline - BTC- which crosses Georgia and Turkey. The BTC was not affected by the Russian bombardments, but a railway bridge was destroyed in Georgia, forcing British Petroleum (BP), the main operator of the oilfields of Azerbaijan, to stop transporting oil by rail tanker wagons towards the Black Sea. As a result there has been an increase in the use of the busy Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline which passes through Russia...

The Nabucco project (also supposed to transport Caspian gas towards Europe by avoiding Russia) is at a standstill in Baku. while Moscow is building a competitor pipeline...

Many alliances are as uncertain as the result of the elections in the United States...

A new multipolar order is emerging. But it continues to propagate war and social regression, as well as national oppression; and the Putin regime (like China) does not represent any kind of progressive alternative, neither on the social level nor from the point of view of democracy.

## **Small states and great powers in evolving relations of property...**

The search for cultural and political recognition in the face of the conflicting dominations by the great empires (Persia, Byzantium, then the Ottoman Empire - against Russia) was expressed for the Orthodox Christians of Georgia by a "voluntary union" with Russia at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; then it turned against the Russification imposed by Moscow and against a certain Great-

Russian racism ...

But when it sought in its turn to affirm its sovereignty over a territory where other communities lived, Georgian nationalism itself became “unitary” and dominating. And this is why, in conflict with the Georgians, the Ossetians (who are also Orthodox Christians, but speak a form of Persian) were the first historical points of support for Moscow in its conquest of the Caucasus in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the foundation on their territory of the imperial city of Vladikavkaz (“gateway to the Caucasus”) - a conquest which was completed a century later by the submission of the neighbouring Chechen people.

But marriages between Ossetians and Georgians were possible, even frequent - a certain Stalin was the son of such a mixed couple... It is the dictatorial political choices involved in building national states on the backs of other peoples, it is the inequalities and injustices that are the cause of the conflicts... When he exercised power in the Kremlin, Stalin manipulated the national questions for which he had responsibility in the USSR, with the aim both of establishing Great-Russian domination (denounced by Lenin shortly before his death) and of selecting peoples reputed to be “loyal”, or on the contrary suspected of contesting or subverting the regime in power. The distribution of territories and the deportation of entire peoples (like the Crimean Tatars), the organisation of the autonomous republics and of national rights made it possible to divide, granting some subordinates rights while governing in a dictatorial way. The Ossetians were all the more favourable to Moscow in that they had been mainly Bolsheviks, faced with a Georgia that was at the same time Menshevik and unitary. Nevertheless, while granting a statute of autonomy to the Ossetians, the Kremlin also exploited the mountainous barrier of the Caucasus in order to integrate North Ossetia into the Russian federation, and South Ossetia into Georgia.

But the internal borders within the USSR (sometimes having a certain basis in history, or aiming at weakening such or such a suspect nationality) would be transformed into real state frontiers after the break-up of the USSR, proclaimed by Boris Yeltsin. Minorities would be trapped within states which all the more denied their rights in that they appeared to be Trojan horses of Moscow. The dissolution of the USSR was in actual fact the affirmation of the Federation of Russia by Yeltsin at the time when he launched the liberal shock therapy, in 1991... The control of the new states implied also the control of a territory, of its wealth, and of currency reserves resulting from foreign trade - when there were resources, in particular energy, to export. The Russian Federation held the bulk of the energy resources, which it would be able to “cash in on” at a high price to its former partners...

In what architecture of relations of property and international relations would the new oligarchs who profited from the opaque financial operations of capitalist restoration situate themselves? The new “elected leaders” would manipulate nationalism both against Moscow and as a substitute for a protective social programme - while adopting a threatening attitude against all the minorities which might look towards Moscow for protection... Clientelism and corruption became general, not in fact excepting any of the new regimes. But under the Yeltsin era, the oligarchs tended to set up strongholds against the central government - which even lost its power to make them pay taxes... The reign of Putin meant the re-establishment of a hierarchy and of a strong central power (demonstrated both by the pulling into line of the oligarchs and by the second dirty war of Chechnya), which were sources of a certain popularity. But at the same time that enables him to impose internal market relations, i.e. a new labour code and prices of basic goods that the Medef (the French employers’ organisation) would applaud with both hands...

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**P.S.**

\* Translated from the French by International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV404 - September 2008.

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## Footnotes

[1] See [Défense anti-missile : Le monde se rapproche d'une guerre à cause de Washington et de la Pologne](#)