

Russia moves toward military conflict with Georgia

Vladimir Volkov
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During his October 25 nationally televised “talk with the Russian people,” President Vladimir Putin confirmed the intention of his regime to defend the provincial autonomous administrations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia in the event of military action against them by the Georgian government.

“We are concerned with the militarization of Georgia,” Putin declared, and blamed the Tbilisi regime of Mikheil Saakashvili for the recent rise in tensions between the two countries. Putin continued, “The worsening of Russian-Georgian relations is directly related to preparations to solve the problems of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by means of force.”

Tbilisi, supported by the US, is, in fact, stoking up tensions with Moscow. But Putin’s attempt to depict Moscow as merely a passive victim is disingenuous, to say the least. The Kremlin has actively supported the separatist ruling elites in the two tiny autonomous regions of Georgia and utilized them to defend and expand its own influence in the Caucasus, a geopolitically vital region that sits astride the main energy trade and export routes to the Caspian and Central Asian reserves of oil and natural gas.

While Tbilisi, financed and armed by the United States, is preparing to reassert by force of arms its control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia is getting set to parry and defeat these attempts. Within Russia, the political discourse has centered on recognizing the independence of these regions, and those circles within the Russian ruling elite that promote extreme right-wing nationalism declare that Russia is entitled to treat Georgia the same way that Israel dealt with Lebanon.

They suggest a bombing campaign against Georgia followed by its temporary occupation by Russian forces. In their view, this action would undermine the present regime in Georgia and enhance Russia’s authority on the world stage as a “sovereign state” able to defend its national interests by any means necessary.

Officially, the Kremlin does not support this program as yet. In his television appearance, Putin noted that “we do not aim to expand our territory; even after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia remains the world’s largest country. We have enough territory...”

Despite such words, however, the logic of events leads to growing instability in the Caucasus and the prospect of bloody conflicts.

The arrest in late September in Tbilisi of four Russian military officers and Georgia’s accusations that they were spies sparked the current heightening of tensions. The immediate and sharp reaction by Russia showed that the Moscow regime was only waiting for a suitable pretext to commence an aggressive anti-Georgian campaign within Russia, and to declare to the rest of the world its readiness to proceed with its support for the separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and recognize the “independence” of these statelets.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov, meeting in late September in Slovenia with the defense minister from the 26 NATO countries, branded the Tbilisi government a “bandit” regime and accused NATO of providing Georgia with weapons. In early October, Putin called the

Georgian government “a terrorist administration” and compared the actions of Saakashvili to those of Lavrenty Beria.

This comparison is both superficial and contradictory. Beria was Soviet dictator Stalin’s right-hand man, and Stalin is today acclaimed by the Kremlin as a great statesman and the victor in World War II. The comparison of the Georgian president to Beria testifies both to the level of the Kremlin’s anger and its readiness to proceed with extreme measures in the fight against those it deems to be its enemies.

Russia’s reaction to the arrest of its officers took the form of a series of unprecedented measures attacking and persecuting Russian residents of Georgian extraction and stoking the flames of Great Russian chauvinism. Russia halted all transportation and postal links with Georgia, expelled hundreds of Georgian citizens, accusing them of violating immigration laws, etc.

The Georgian ambassador to Russia, Zurab Pataradze, interviewed by the news agency Interfax, said that over 800 citizens of Georgia living in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities have been expelled to Georgia. According to Pataradze, the Kremlin authorities are getting ready to deport another 2,100 persons.

Within a few days of Georgia’s arrest of the Russian officers, most of Russia’s diplomats in Tbilisi were withdrawn to Moscow. Simultaneously, the Russian embassy in Tbilisi stopped processing visas for Georgian citizens and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed Russians to stop traveling to Georgia. The Russian State Duma quickly adopted an act to prohibit all monetary transfers to Georgia via Russian banks.

In Moscow, the casinos Kristall, Golden Palace and Golden Palace Weekend, which, according to Russian authorities, were controlled by “Georgian criminals,” were closed down.

There were press reports that Moscow public schools had received instructions to compile lists of pupils with Georgian last names, and some bookstores in Moscow reported demands to withdraw from sale the books of authors “with politically incorrect” family names. Included in this black list are the well-known poet and singer Bulat Okudzhava and a popular writer of detective novels, Boris Akunin (Chkhartishvili).

This hysterical anti-Georgian campaign provoked a protest within Russia. The well-known movie actor Stanislav Sadalsky requested Georgia grant him Georgian citizenship. A group of artists and writers published an appeal entitled “No to Ethnic Cleansing in Russia. No to Another War in the Caucasus.”

The authors of this appeal denounced as a national tragedy the campaign to persecute Georgians “irrespective of their citizenship, age and social status.” Among the signatories were the actress Lia Akhedzhakova, the historian Leonid Batkin, the journalist Artemy Troitsky, the actress Inna Churikova and the actor Sergey Yursky.

Tensions have continually intensified since the regime change in Tbilisi in the fall of 2003, which was financed and supported politically by Washington. At that time, a group of young politicians around Saakashvili

removed from power President Eduard Shevardnadze, set up a regime completely dependent on support from across the Atlantic, and openly pursued a policy aimed at expanding American influence in the Caucasus and the Caspian Basin.

The conflict has grown especially in the past year. In December of 2005, Russia imposed limits on the import of biological plants from Georgia, supposedly because of violations of health regulations, and in March of 2006 it halted the transport and importation of seeds.

At the end of March, Russia banned the purchase of Georgian wines, cognac and champagne. Experts estimated the economic damage to Georgia to be on the order of \$700 million. In May, prohibitions were extended to bottled mineral water from Georgia, causing an additional loss to the Georgian economy of \$150 million annually.

There are discussions within the Russian government of a possible energy blockade on Georgia. Last winter an explosion occurred that temporarily shut one of the gas pipelines leading from Russia to Georgia. For a few days, natural gas supplies were interrupted and many inhabitants of Georgia remained without heat. At the time, Tbilisi accused Russia of conniving in the explosion.

On its own, Georgia is able to produce only 40 percent of the energy it needs. The rest must be imported from other former Soviet republics—first of all, Russia. One factor militating against an energy blockade of Georgia is that it would affect friendly Armenia, which receives its energy across Georgian territory.

Ever since Saakashvili came to power, Georgia has been expanding its military strength. The Georgian military budget was the fastest growing military budget in the world in 2005. The United States has allocated millions of dollars for 2007 to expand and equip Georgia's army.

This past summer, Georgia extended its military control in the Kodori Gorge, which is a part of Abkhazia. This strengthened suspicions that Saakashvili plans to proceed further. The Russian media report that Georgian military forces in the Kodori Gorge are in a position to commence actions into Abkhazia.

Last Tuesday, President Saakashvili opened a new army base in central Georgia. He announced that next May he will open another base in the town of Gori, which "will be equipped to meet all requirements for Georgia to become in the future a member of NATO." The new base was built with French aid. The opening ceremony was attended by a US congressional delegation, headed by Richard Lugar, a well-known proponent of anti-Russian measures.

Saakashvili has spoken often of the external enemies of Georgia, and said that the country "must build a total defensive structure."

According to reports published by the newspaper *Izvestia*, beginning last year Georgia received some arms shipments from eastern Europe, including tanks, fighter planes and ammunition. Among the providers of these armaments were Ukraine and the Baltic states.

Russia is also expanding its military strength in the region. In his TV appearance, President Putin proclaimed that by the end of next year Russia plans to spend \$500 million to reinforce its borders between the Caspian and Black seas.

Russia is also strengthening its naval forces on the Black Sea. Russia held naval exercises earlier this month, which, according to Georgian observers, intruded into Georgia's economic zone.

Simultaneously, Russia announced its readiness to add to its fleet in the Crimea. Conflicts have emerged in the recent period between Russia and Ukraine over the placement and activities of lighthouses in the area and the rent paid by Russia to Ukraine for using the naval base in Sebastopol. However, after the center of power in Kiev moved from Yushchenko to his pro-Moscow rival Yanukovich, the disagreements appeared to fade away. The two countries agreed to set the price of natural gas exported by Russia to Ukraine at \$135 per thousand cubic meters, and the rent for Sebastopol was frozen at the level of the 1997 agreement, i.e., at \$93

million per year.

Three unrecognized autonomous regions—the Dnestr region of Moldova and the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—continuously appeal for Russian support. In September, a referendum was held in the Dnestr region and the majority voted for closer relations with Russia.

In mid-October, the National Assembly of Abkhazia turned to Russian leaders with an appeal to recognize the independence of their republic and set up close relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia.

A plebiscite is scheduled for November 12 in South Ossetia, and its results will likely be another sign of the tilt of the region toward Russia.

The Kremlin is wary of taking abrupt steps toward recognizing the independence of these republics, lest it provoke negative reactions in the West. Up to now, the official policy of Russia has been to wait until Europe recognizes the independence of Kosovo from Serbia, and then use that step as the legal pretext for changing its own relations with the three autonomous regions.

Now, however, the Kremlin's hand may be forced and it may feel obliged to proceed with greater speed. In the last couple of months, the Russian leadership has announced a number of measures unfavorable to American energy needs. Specifically, a question was raised about ecological violations during construction of Russia's massive "Sakhalin-2" oil and gas project. Following his trip to Sakhalin, the minister of natural resources, Yuri Trutnev, announced that such violations might call for criminal sanctions. Total fines may exceed the investments made, and foreign companies may be forced to withdraw from any further plans to participate in the project.

This month, during his visit to Germany, President Putin announced that natural gas from the Shtokman fields in the Barents Sea would flow not to the US, but to Germany, and Germany would as a result become the main gas distribution center in Europe.

The situation in Georgia could also crucially affect the future of the Baku-Ceyhan oil and gas pipeline. The pipeline is running; however, its utilization is too low for the pipeline to pay for its enormous construction costs and turn a profit. To become profitable, it is necessary for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to decide to ship their energy resources by way of Baku, and away from Russia. Such a step would deal a sizeable blow to Russia's reputation as an "energy superpower."

As far as the United States is concerned, if the Saakashvili regime in Tbilisi were to succeed in defeating the separatists and consolidating Georgia, it would permit the US to develop its plans concerning the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline and to expand its influence in the Caucasus and the entire Caspian region. For Russia, destabilizing the Georgian state is a means of blocking American efforts in the region. Under these conditions, one or another form of military confrontation is eminently possible.

The very logic of integrating these regions, and the whole territory of the former Soviet Union, within the structures of the world capitalist market leads to explosive and bloody consequences, flowing from the great power competition for access to natural resources and expansion of political influence. There is only one way to avoid the looming catastrophe—an independent and united revolutionary movement of the working classes of all of the countries in the region on the basis of the program of socialist internationalism.

The 1917 October Revolution showed the way forward for solving the national and territorial disputes in the Caucasus. In 1922, Georgia joined with the Russian Federation as a full and equal member within the USSR. The subsequent bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet regime under the Stalinist bureaucracy does not negate this historical experience. The revolutionary impetus of the October Revolution indicated the road by which tensions between Russia and Georgia and between the various national and ethnic groups in the region can be overcome in a progressive and democratic manner.



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