

European Union summit sides with Georgia

Peter Schwarz
2 September 2008

“Admonishment for Russia, money for Georgia”. In these words, European Union circles described the program of the EU special summit, held yesterday in Brussels under the auspices of France’s presidency of the EU.

The war between Russia and Georgia, and the associated sharp tensions between Russia, the US and Europe, are shaking European foreign policy to the core and have divided the EU right down the middle. The seriousness with which the situation is viewed is underlined by the fact that the 27 EU government heads met at a special summit for the first time since February 2003 at the beginning of the Iraq war.

The summit was preceded by a fierce public debate, not only right across Europe but also through the various political camps.

One group of states—headed by Poland, the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Britain and Sweden—appealed for confrontation with Moscow, in close collaboration with Washington. They were not satisfied with condemning Russia, but demanded punitive measures, such as excluding Russia from the G8 and ending negotiations over a European-Russian partnership agreement, as well as placing visa restrictions on Russian citizens.

Another group—headed by Germany, France and Italy—rejected sanctions and advocated dialogue with Moscow. Europe, according to their argument, can only prevent the conflict escalating and spreading geographically, and preserve its own interests vis-à-vis Russia and in the Caucasus, if it remains in dialogue with Moscow.

The summit faced two contradictory tasks. On the one hand, it had to demonstrate consensus, in order to avoid a further drifting apart of the EU, with possible detrimental consequences for the entire European Union project. On the other hand, it had to resist the pressure of the US and its closest European allies, and prevent an escalation of the conflict with Russia, without thereby provoking a veto from its strongly anti-Russian Eastern European members.

The significance of the special EU summit did not lie in the predictable criticism of Moscow, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented on Saturday, “but in whether it succeeds in bridging the intra-European divide, providing the French EU presidency with sufficient backing for discussions with Moscow”.

The same article warned of the consequences of any escalation of the conflict with Russia. “If things get out of control,” its author Martin Winter wrote, “then tensions could also affect the Ukraine and Moldavia. If Europe and Russia enter a new ice age, then other things will also be derailed in the medium-term: Dealing with regional and global crises and the fight against terrorism will become more difficult, and it will herald a new arms race. A lesson

from the Cold War is that a confrontational attitude between Europe and Russia would waste forces that are needed by both in the global competitive struggle. Something that is neither in the interests of the one nor the other. This should provide the impetus for serious dialogue.”

Although the article did not spell out that such a weakening of Europe and Russia could be in the interest of the US, this is the logic of the events. Significantly from within Europe’s leading political circles there is barely a word of criticism of Washington and its Georgian vassal, President Mikheil Saakashvili. But off the record, many European politicians express their anger with the latter, taking the view that Saakashvili—encouraged by the US—was responsible for the outbreak of the war.

In the end, the Brussels summit agreed to condemn Russia’s “inappropriate response” and declared Russia’s recognition of the dissident regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was “contrary to international law”. Any solution to the conflict must “rest on respect for independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity—and not on unilateral facts, which contradict international law,” according to EU Council president, France’s Nicolas Sarkozy.

The summit demanded Russia fully implement the six-point cease-fire plan negotiated by Sarkozy, and the French president announced he would travel to Russia and Georgia again in the coming weeks, in order to look for a way out of the crisis. Georgia is to receive comprehensive aid. But what this means concretely will be decided later.

The summit did not agree to sanctions against Russia, with one exception: negotiations over the planned European-Russian partnership and co-operation agreement are to be suspended until such time as Moscow withdraws its troops from Georgia. These negotiations had already stalled because of Polish objections. They were to have continued on September 15.

Before the summit, signals had been sent to the Russian government that there was no interest in heightening the crisis. In a long telephone call with his Russian colleague Sergei Lavrov, the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier agreed to try to calm down the situation.

Strategic interests

However, it should not be anticipated that efforts at calming the situation will have any success, since the opposing strategic interests at stake in the Caucasus are far too great.

The Western media eagerly try to present the war as a struggle between a democratic Georgia, striving for liberty and independence, and an authoritarian, imperialist Russia. But Georgia’s President Saakashvili is poorly suited to the role of democratic martyr. Having come to power through a rebellion

financed by the West, his re-election at the beginning of this year only succeeded due to the brutal suppression of the opposition.

According to a report in the newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, even the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) has concluded that Saakashvili contributed to the outbreak of the war through the deliberate attack on South Ossetia. In the reports of OSCE observers, there is even talk of Georgian war crimes being committed during the nocturnal surprise attack.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* openly admitted that “NATO’s interest in Georgia arises less from the desire to establish a beacon of democracy there, than the country’s proximity to the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Basin.”

In his weekly column in *Die Zeit*, former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said that the Russian-Georgian war “concerns Russian-American competition for strategic control over the oil and gas resources of this whole region—it is the new great game.”

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who on the eve of the summit published a virulent attack on Russia in the *Sunday Observer* newspaper, likewise left no doubt about the prime concern in the Caucasus. He calculated that Britain, which presently covers 80 percent of its energy needs from its own resources, would have to import nearly two thirds of its gas and over half its requirement for oil by 2020—“precisely as markets become more volatile as more people chase more fewer natural resources”.

Therefore, Brown stated, he would be “pressing European leaders to increase funding for a project to allow us to source energy from the Caspian Sea, reducing our dependence on Russia”. As a glance at the map shows, the only transport route from the Caspian Sea to Europe lies straight through Georgia. Afghanistan is too unreliable due to the ongoing war in the country, and political reasons prevent any looking to Iran.

As for Russia, it is not primarily motivated by concerns for the rights of Abkhazia and South Ossetia but is reacting to its encirclement by the NATO military alliance. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union under President Boris Yeltsin, Russia has gradually been displaced from areas that in part were under its rule for centuries. Millions of Russian-speaking former Soviet citizens today live outside Russia’s national territory. The US and Europe compete for influence in Central Asia and in the Caspian region. NATO has advanced right up to the borders of the former Soviet Union—and in the Baltic even beyond that. If the Ukraine and Georgia join NATO, the Black Sea would fall under its sphere of influence. As a result, Russia faces becoming the plaything of the great powers.

For a long time, the country’s ruling elite has passively observed these developments, concentrating its energy on plundering the state property of the former Soviet Union. Now it is reacting with methods that match its bourgeois class character. Unable to appeal to the solidarity of the international working class, as did the early Soviet Union under Lenin and Trotsky, it is relying on nationalism and naked military force.

But that cannot detract from the responsibility of the Western powers for the present crisis in the Caucasus; not only the US, but also those European powers that are now trying to present

themselves as mediators, in particular Germany.

Since German reunification in 1990, Berlin has energetically sought the inclusion of the former Eastern Bloc countries within the European Union and NATO. It supported the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the sending of troops into Kosovo, to Afghanistan and other parts of the world, and has become very active in the Caucasus and Central Asia. For a long time, these policies could be combined with maintaining close relations with Moscow; but that is no longer possible. The expansionist character of German foreign policy is now having repercussions.

Germany’s political elite is divided on how to proceed. There are those—like Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, large parts of the Social Democratic Party and the Free Democratic Party, the Left Party and the spokesmen of the energy and export industries—who prioritise the relationship with Moscow. There are also those—sections of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union, as well as some Greens—who are set on confrontation. CDU foreign policy expert Eckart von Klaeden, for example, is demanding the temporary exclusion of Russia from the G-8 and the admission of Georgia and the Ukraine into NATO.

In his regular column in *Die Zeit*, Greens ex-Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer called confrontation with Russia a strategic stupidity far exceeding Iraq. He claimed that “the common interests of Russia and the West instead call for a new era of co-operation”. But such co-operation required the development of the European Union and Germany into a great power.

“The response to Russia’s return to imperial great power politics,” Fischer wrote, “should not be met with punishment, but with the development of the West’s, and above all European positions of power.” He added: “Those who want co-operation with Russia—and this lies in Europe’s interest—must manifest and act with a united strength. That is the lesson, which the Caucasus teaches, and which Europe must urgently heed.”

Fischer is articulating the majority opinion of Germany’s ruling elite, which is now increasingly following in the aggressive footsteps of its historical forebears.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact