

EU report states Georgia started 2008 war with Russia

Georgian attack unjustifiable under international law

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When is military aggression not military aggression? For the powers that be in Washington and their media lackeys, the foreign policy interests of US imperialism dictate the answer. Hence, in the August 2008 war between US-ally Georgia and Russia, the former was portrayed as the helpless victim and the latter the aggressive bully.

Following 10 months of investigation ordered by the European Union (EU) into the war, a report has found “unequivocal” proof that Georgia was the aggressor.

The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia issued a report September 30 that contains more than a thousand pages of evidence. The Council of the EU established the mission in order to verify conflicting claims of responsibility for the war. The inquiry was led by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, who stated that “None of the explanations given by the Georgian authorities in order to provide some form of legal justification for the attack” are valid.

“In particular, there was no massive Russian military invasion under way, which had to be stopped by Georgian military forces,” Tagliavini added.

“The shelling of Tskhinvali [the capital of South Ossetia, the breakaway Georgian province in which Russian troops have been stationed since the early 1990s] by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict in Georgia,” the report states.

“There is the question of whether the force by Georgia during the night of 7/8 August was justifiable under international law. It was not...it is not possible to accept that the shelling of Tskhinvali with Grad multiple rocket launchers and heavy artillery would satisfy the requirements of having been necessary and proportionate,” the investigators found.

Scores of civilians were killed in the initial bombardment of Tskhinvali, and others were killed or injured following the invasion of the city by 1,500 Georgian troops. The BBC and Human Rights Watch found evidence of civilians being deliberately targeted by Georgian forces, including indiscriminate firing into basements being used as shelters. The EU report states that Georgian attacks on Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia “in the initial phase of the conflict” were unjustified.

The findings directly refute claims made not only by the Georgia government of President Mikheil Saakashvili, but also by its backers in Washington and the US media.

Initially taken aback by the scale of Moscow’s response, Washington quickly acted to assert its interests in Georgia against those of Russia. Vice President Dick Cheney stated that “Russian aggression must not go unanswered,” adding that Russia’s military actions would have “serious consequences” for relations with the United States. Echoing this sentiment, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama denounced Russian “aggression” and solidarized himself with the position of the Bush

administration in backing Georgia’s claims that it had only acted to defend itself.

True to form, the US media rapidly and assiduously adopted the official line. After initially expressing uncertainty as to who was responsible for the war, the media swung into full propaganda mode as soon as it became clear that the scale of Russia’s military response posed a threat to US strategic interests in a region vital to oil exports from the Caspian Sea.

To back these interests and send a message to Moscow that the US would not tolerate the toppling of its placeman in Tbilisi, Bush dispatched a US naval force off the Georgian Black Sea coast, close to the flagship of the Russian fleet.

On August 9, the *Washington Post* set the tone in an editorial entitled “Stopping Russia.” The paper’s editors lay blame for the conflict squarely on Russia’s pursuit of “hegemony in the Caucasus” before calling on the US and NATO to “impose a price on Russia.” The idea that Washington might also be in pursuit of hegemony in the region did not, of course, rate a mention.

Two days later in the same newspaper, neoconservative Robert Kagan wrote an opinion piece comparing Russia’s actions in Georgia with the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938. “[T]he details of who did what to precipitate Russia’s war against Georgia are not very important,” Kagan wrote.

Similar pieces appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The TV news channels joined the chorus, presenting a steady stream of footage of Georgian towns and villages allegedly destroyed by Russian forces, while blacking out any coverage of Georgian war crimes in South Ossetia.

Writing in the *New York Times* the following month, Roger Cohen called for a more aggressive defence of Georgia by NATO: “Blood has been shed, Georgia’s borders trampled, and its breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia recognized by Russia resurgent.... I’m appalled by what Russia has wrought in Georgia.”

As recently as July of this year, US Vice President Joe Biden, on an official visit to Tbilisi, stated that Russia “used a pretext to invade” Georgia in the hope of “wrecking its economy” and persuading its people that “democracy doesn’t work.”

The contents of the report will also embarrass the European powers. During the war, they fell in line behind the US in criticizing Russian “aggression,” with British foreign secretary David Miliband leading the pack with a denunciation of the “entirely unjustified” invasion by Russia. “You don’t need to be a student of the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 to find the sight of Russian tanks rolling into a neighbouring country chilling,” he wrote in Britain’s *Times* newspaper.

The exposure of this propaganda campaign by the EU investigation’s findings, which have been seized on by the Kremlin to justify its ongoing

military presence in South Ossetia, will soon be swept under the carpet by a dutiful media eager to cover up its own role.

The response of the media to the report has been muted. The *Washington Post* had an article covering the EU mission's findings on page 10, stating that an independent inquiry "has concluded that Georgia violated international law and triggered last year's war." Naturally, the paper expressed no contrition for the biased and hyperbolic articles and opinion pieces that it ran last year.

Roger Cohen's article in the *New York Times* yesterday made no mention of the report and its detailed findings relating to a conflict that he had seemed so concerned about, while the newspaper ran a brief article that focused on the efforts of the Georgian government to dispute the EU investigation's findings.

Shamelessly, the European powers and the Obama administration will seek to use the report to draw a line under the conflict and continue their limited rapprochement with Moscow as a means to secure Russian backing for more pressing concerns such as imposing sanctions on Iran and assisting the occupation of Afghanistan. It is for this reason that the *Post*, *Times* and other leading newspapers have given the report's findings even the little coverage they have.

The Georgian government has claimed that the EU report justifies their claims that Russia was building up military forces in South Ossetia and overseeing attacks by allied militias on Georgian villages. However, the report states that while there is evidence of an increased presence of Russian military forces, and that Russia may have been turning a blind eye to Ossetian incursions into Georgia proper, this did not amount to a justification for Saakashvili's launching of the war.

"There was no ongoing armed attack by Russia before the start of the Georgian operation. Georgian claims of a large-scale presence of Russian armed forces in South Ossetia prior to the Georgian offensive could not be substantiated...it could also not be verified that Russia was on the verge of such a major attack," the investigation found.

The report states that Russia had a legal right to launch a counter-offensive against the Georgian attack. However, the massive Russian military response, including the invasion of the territory under Tbilisi's control and the temporary occupation of some Georgian towns "went far beyond the reasonable limits of defence" and was "in violation of international law."

In addition, the EU mission claimed that destruction in Georgia proper carried out by Russia forces "which came after the ceasefire agreement was not justifiable by any means."

Since the end of the war, Russia has recognized the unilateral declarations of independence from Georgia of South Ossetia and the other pro-Russian breakaway province of Abkhazia. The report commented that the independence of these territories had no authority under international law and that Moscow should respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia. It is worth noting that this same principle applies to the breakaway Serbian province of Kosovo, which the US and most of the EU countries have recognized against the protests of Belgrade.

The EU mission's findings confirm an earlier report issued by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the international association whose monitors were in Georgia when the fighting broke out. Issued in late 2008, the OSCE report also flatly contradicted the Georgian and US accounts of the war.

The OSCE concluded that the conflict began in the early hours of August 8 when Georgian troops—trained and equipped by the US—shelled and fired rockets at Russian forces and civilian areas in Tskhinvali, "exposing civilians, Russian peacekeepers and unarmed monitors to harm."

Rejecting Georgian claims that Russian troops had initiated the war by shelling Georgian villages, OSCE monitors stated that there was no evidence to back up Saakashvili's main justifications for the assault.

Former British army officer Ryan Grist, who was the senior OSCE representative in Georgia when the war broke out, said, "It was clear to me that the [Georgian] attack was completely indiscriminate and disproportionate to any, if indeed there had been any, provocation."

Far from the Saakashvili government responding to a large-scale Russian build-up in South Ossetia, it is much more likely that Tbilisi felt it could take control of the province precisely because of the weakness of the Russian military presence. Saakashvili doubtless felt he had the authority and the backing of the United States, which had sponsored his rise to power in the 2003 "Rose Revolution" and provided billions of dollars of aid and military support to the former Soviet republic.

Following the heavy Georgian bombardment of South Ossetia, Saakashvili evidently hoped a ground invasion of the territory would rapidly overrun remaining Russian and local forces, allowing the Georgian army to seize and seal off the Roki Tunnel, the main transport corridor through the mountains separating Russia and South Ossetia.

In the case of a weak Russian response—as was expected not only by Saakashvili but by the US, which was clearly surprised by the Kremlin's massive military response—Georgia could have achieved the long-standing goal of establishing control over the secessionist province, which has not accepted Tbilisi's authority since the end of the USSR.

While the regime of Saakashvili is clearly a dangerous and destabilizing force in an already unstable region, the principal aggressive power in the world today is US imperialism. Since the liquidation of the USSR by the Stalinist bureaucracy, Washington has sought to assert its power in the former Soviet region. Reflecting the relative economic decline of US capital vis-à-vis its major rivals, this task has been increasingly carried out utilizing its military superiority.

From the break-up of Yugoslavia and the US-led bombing of Serbia, to the expansion of NATO into the former USSR and Warsaw Pact countries, to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the US has set itself on a collision course with its rivals, especially with Russia. Washington's backing of Saakashvili in August of last year was a continuation of this drive to dominate those regions most rich in oil and gas resources and energy transit routes.

While Obama is for now employing a policy aimed at "resetting" relations with Moscow from their nadir in the last days of the Bush administration, the US ruling class will not tolerate any attempts by Moscow to expand its power in the Caucasus region or elsewhere. Ultimately, the ambition of Washington is to roll back Moscow's sphere of influence and establish the dominance of US-based capital. The war in Georgia, and the associated media campaign against Russia, provide a foretaste of even more direct conflicts to come.

The full text of the EU's report can be found here: <http://www.ceiig.ch/>.



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