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## South Ossetia and Russia's War on Georgia

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Talks on security and stability in the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia begin today in Geneva. They spring from the plan negotiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy to cease fire in Russia's August war on Georgia. Delegates to this conference will hear much chatter about South Ossetia because Russia still implausibly maintains that it invaded Georgia to protect its so-called citizens there. So, here is some straight talk on South Ossetia.

I know South Ossetia. I am Ossete; I speak Ossetian and Russian, not Georgian; I was born and raised in South Ossetia; I lived there until two months ago when Russian-backed separatists routed ethnic Georgians and anyone associated with Georgia.

In this brief article, I offer three points: 1) Vladimir Putin's presidency of Russia marked a bad turn for South Ossetia; 2) since 2004, Moscow and the separatist regime in Tskhinvali wanted war; and 3) Russian-backed separatists have cleansed South Ossetia of ethnic Georgians.

It started with trouble. As the Soviet Union disintegrated, Moscow exploited ethnic tensions in the South Caucasus to thwart Georgian independence and, failing that, to cripple it. Newly independent Georgia responded with immature actions and rhetoric. Civil war left South Ossetia as part of Georgia, but controlled by Russian-backed separatists. I was one of them.

Although many people fled, afterward, South Ossetia remained a patchwork of Ossetian and Georgian villages.

In 1992, then Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chairman of the Georgian State Council Eduard Shevardnadze signed a ceasefire with four principles: 1) revival of trust between Georgians and Ossete; 2) agreement on a mutual security structure; 3) development of South Ossetia-Georgia economic ties; and 4) conflict resolution.

For the remainder of the nineties, the first three proceeded reasonably well, even helped by the Russians. Conflict resolution, regrettably, languished. Then, in 2001, it became clear that the new Russian president regarded South Ossetia as a geopolitical tool to destabilize Georgia. Newly installed separatist leader Eduard Kokoity shuttled between Tskhinvali and Moscow.

A war of words ensued. There were clashes with the Georgian police. Newly elected Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili shut down the contraband market at Ergneti, a major source of cash for the Kokoity coterie. Russia distributed passports to create instant "citizens" for itself. By 2004, war seemed inevitable.

The turning point was voting on November 12, 2006. Separatist-controlled areas reelected Kokoity and endorsed South Ossetian independence. Georgian controlled areas—25 villages with one quarter of the region's population—elected me as president. I established a governing commission and got to work.

We solved real problems of real people. We built roads, schools, a theater and a hospital. I was so proud to host visitors to our new Tamarasheni school—only on television have I seen such a school. We rehabilitated homes. The police worked for the people. Some families began moving to our regions from the separatist-controlled areas.

The Kokoity regime became angry.

They blocked roads and harassed visitors. Shooting increased. With clear Russian encouragement, Tskhinvali spewed anti-Georgian propaganda.

Saakashvili tried to negotiate, but the separatists turned a deaf ear.

It came to a well-orchestrated climax in August, when everyone would be on holiday or at the Olympics in China.

Now there is much chatter—in Georgia and in the west—about how the war started and what Saakashvili did or did not do on August 7. Do not walk into a Russian rhetorical trap.

In late July and early August, shooting and shelling increased. Russian peacekeepers remained idle. On the night of August 2-3, Georgian peacekeepers responded to shooting in the villages of Nuli and Avnevi. The separatists responded with tanks and two Georgians died. Georgian State Minister for Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili's attempt to talk was rebuffed.

Finally, on August 7, General Marat Kulakhmetov, Russian peacekeeping commander, informed Yakobashvili that Russian political representatives were unavailable and Moscow had lost control of the Kokoity regime.

Anyway, it was too late. On August 6, Russian advance patrols were already through the Roki Tunnel and as far into Georgia as Java, 20 kilometers from Tskhinvali. Russia had begun its war.

500 people—Russians, Ossete, Georgians—died. 2,000 were wounded. 20,000—mostly Georgians, but some Ossete, too—were forced to flee. Those who did not run quickly enough were rounded up and taken to cells and cages in Tskhinvali. Those who resisted—42, I think—were shot. Homes were looted; villages burned. Today, there are no more than 100 Georgians in South Ossetia.

The overall blame is on Russia.

Now, the Geneva conference must face these facts. Then, it will take time and money. Decisions are needed in Tbilisi, Moscow, Washington and Brussels. The delegates in Geneva must decide whether to be a prime mover or a footnote in this process.

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