

stronger pressures than those of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. Russia's energy blackmail during the Shevardnadze era, probably the most effective weapon that Moscow could deploy against Georgia, would have been less devastating had the Georgian bureaucracy been less corrupt and had Georgian officials not themselves benefited from the situation. Georgia needed not only a wise and experienced leader who perfectly understood its adversary, but also a deep societal and cultural transformation.

4

The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999–2008

Andrei Illarionov

Three initial comments must be made at the beginning of this chapter. First, there is a substantial lack of important documents that are necessary for providing a full, objective, and balanced picture of the Russian leadership's preparations for war against Georgia. At this moment, researchers do not have access to many Russian documents that describe and outline the actions of key figures. Therefore, the author cannot claim to know every step the Russian authorities took, their motivations, their choices among available options, and important details of the implementation of their plans. As some elements are still missing, the whole picture must necessarily appear somewhat sketchy. What is possible to do now is to provide the reader with as full and thorough a sequence of events and description of the main developments as is possible at this point in time. Hopefully, they will speak for themselves and supply background information that can be used in the future to achieve a fuller account of how the Russian leadership prepared this war.

Second, this chapter makes no attempt to detail the Georgian government's responses to Russian actions, nor does it explain the Russian responses to the Georgian government's moves. It is undeniable that both parties—the Russian-Abkhazian-South Ossetian coalition, on the one hand, and Georgia, on the other—took steps toward a military solution of the crisis, or, more correctly, of the crises. Nevertheless, it appears obvious that the initiative in most, if not all, of those steps lay with the Russian-Abkhazian-South Ossetian coalition. The role of the Georgian government, which is covered in other chapters of this book, was not exclusively passive. Nevertheless, much available evidence refutes the often-heard claim that the Georgian government under Mikheil Saakashvili played a crucial role in provoking the war.

The most important grounds for this conclusion is that the Russian leadership had in fact taken very important decisions that made war between

Russia and Georgia inevitable much earlier—between September 1999 and June 2003. Whatever the real or alleged contribution of Saakashvili's government to the worsening of Georgia's bilateral relations with Russia, neither he nor his colleagues occupied any position in the Georgian government structures before November 2003. As one can see, Russian authorities had been making serious preparations for war over the span of nearly one decade. Indeed, it is remarkable how detailed, precise, coordinated, and secretive was the Russian leadership's planning for the military actions that caught most of the world by surprise in August 2008.

Third, there is an ongoing debate regarding the hierarchy of specific reasons and factors that led the Russian leadership to launch the war against Georgia that itself is not covered in this chapter. However, an issue that deserves a special discussion is whether the Russian authorities took the decision to start the war in 2008 or earlier, even as early as in 1999–2001. In the latter case the actions that subsequently unfolded would represent merely the execution phase of a "Grand Plan" that had existed for years. In other words, the question is whether the Grand Plan to launch a war against Georgia existed from the very beginning or whether it emerged as a result of evolution, only after the failure of endless attempts by the Russian leadership to weaken, undermine, and destroy the Georgian side through non-military means?

If the latter is true, it is those failures which led to a steady escalation of Russian pressure on Georgia, a process that culminated in a full-scale war in the summer of 2008. The author does not pretend to be able to conclusively resolve this debate. Yet available facts point more to the conclusion that the Russian leadership's inclination to use pressure, coercion, and even violence in its bilateral relations with Georgia was fully evident as early as in 1999–2001. By 2002 the Russian leadership had brought about changes in the leadership of South Ossetia which in itself can be said to have made war with Georgia all but inevitable.

By supplying South Ossetia with heavy military equipment in February 2003, including twelve T-55 tanks, the Russian government deliberately chose a military solution to the conflict with Georgia. By providing the South Ossetian regime with seventy five additional T-72 battle tanks and huge stocks of weaponry and ammunition in May and June 2004, the Russian government further paved the way for future, even larger scale, military action. While it should be mentioned that the role of the Georgian authorities was far from passive in all this, it seems invariably that the Russian-Abkhaz-South Ossetian coalition in most cases made the first moves, to which the Georgians responded (see Table 4.1).

Moreover, even today, nearly a year after the August war, it should be mentioned that no one has put forth a policy that the Georgians might have pursued that would have offered a realistic chance of averting war with the coalition led by their mighty northern neighbor.

September 1999–December 2002: The First Series of Coercive Actions, Capture of the South Ossetian Presidency

The six-year period between October 1993 and August 1999 was a time of relative stability and peace in the relations between Russia and Georgia. This was also true to a certain extent of Georgia's relations with the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. True, there were numerous difficulties, which are described in detail in Thornike Gordadze's chapter in this volume. However, this phase stands in distinct contrast to developments during the five years prior to this period—1988–1993—as well as to events thereafter, i.e., from September 1999 to the present. There may not have been a common will among all sides of the conflict to pursue cooperation and integration but, after several years of bloody conflicts, it did constitute a period of gradual build-up of trust between Georgia and Abkhazia; and especially between Georgia and South Ossetia, with the Russian government, if not fully neutral, markedly pursuing a less overtly interventionist policy than it had previously or would subsequently.

This period of relative calm came to an abrupt end in September 1999. A month after the appointment of Vladimir Putin as prime minister in August 1999, the Russian government (not the Russian president, who was according to the Russian Constitution in charge of international relations) took the first major step away from its earlier policies toward Georgia. It did this by unilaterally uplifting the ban against men of military age crossing the Abkhaz portion of the Russian-Georgian border, a ban that had been instituted by the combined presidents of the CIS countries at their summit on January 19, 1996.¹

On November 9, 2000, the Russian government informed Georgia of its intention to implement a visa regime for Georgian citizens wishing to enter Russia. Over Georgian objections Russia quit the CIS pact that had abolished visas within the Commonwealth and promptly began demanding visas from all Georgian citizens entering Russia. By contrast, Russia set up a greatly simplified visa system for the inhabitants of Abkhazia, Adjara, and South Ossetia.²

In February 2001, an officer of the Russian secret service organized what was called a "Meeting of Four"—a meeting between himself and the

three men considered to be the most radical South Ossetian leaders. These included the intellectual leader of the South Ossetian national movement, Alan Chochiev; former Communist official and by then twice South Ossetian prime minister, Gerasim (Rezo) Khugaev; and the former trade representative of South Ossetia in Moscow, Eduard Kokoity, who had a dubious reputation both as a businessman and professional wrestler. The goal of the meeting was to work out a strategy that would deny victory to the incumbent, Ludvig Chibirov, in the presidential election in the self-styled republic scheduled for late autumn of that year. Chibirov, a professor of Ossetian history by training, had been president of South Ossetia since 1996. He had voluntarily and sincerely cooperated with the Georgian authorities on a settlement of the bilateral conflict and was ready to accept a status of enhanced autonomy for South Ossetia within Georgia. In 1999, along with Eduard Shevardnadze, he signed the so-called Baden Document that could have opened the way for peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. The plan represented a highpoint in bilateral relations with substantial trust being built between the two communities after the skirmishes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Clearly, for the new Russian leadership, this was not a desirable evolution in Georgian-Ossetian relations.

Soon after the Meeting of Four, it became clear that Chochiev would not perform the role defined for him by the Russian leadership, while Khugaev was unable to overcome registration barriers. Eduard Kokoity therefore remained the only aspirant whom the Russian authorities were prepared to support in the South Ossetian presidential election scheduled for late 2001. In the second round of that election held on December 6, 2001, Kokoity was elected president of the enclave with 53 percent of the vote. On January 9, 2002, he appointed Khugaev as his prime minister.

Several days later, Eduard Kokoity called a closed meeting of the South Ossetian elite in which around fifty of the most authoritative members of South Ossetian society participated. Kokoity revealed a plan to gain legal independence for South Ossetia by launching a war against Georgia. Most participants in that meeting found the proposed plan so odd that they dismissed it as nonsense. Over the following years most of those who disagreed with Kokoity at that meeting disappeared from the South Ossetian political scene. Some left the republic, others ended up in the Tskhinvali jail, and still others died under suspicious circumstances.

At Kokoity's urging, the South Ossetian Parliament, in March 2002, adopted a resolution requesting the Russian authorities to recognize the independence of the republic and to admit it into the Russian Federation.³ The speaker of the South Ossetian Parliament, Stanislav Kochiev, traveled

to Moscow to present the request. That same summer the Russian government began preparations for the mass distribution of Russian passports to the inhabitants of South Ossetia, Adjara, and Abkhazia. In June 2002, the Russian Parliament adopted the necessary amendments to the Russian Law on Citizenship, which evoked a strong protest from Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze.⁴ On June 23, 2002, Tskhinvali launched the registration of candidates for Russian citizenship.⁵

Meanwhile, Russian-Georgian tensions were rising as a result of Russian demands to use Georgia's airspace for Russian operations in Chechnya. On August 6, 2002, the Russian Air Force bombed Georgian territory in the Pankisi Gorge.⁶ One civilian was killed and several others wounded. Georgia protested, but Russian authorities flatly denied that their planes had been active in the area.⁷ The OSCE mission in Georgia, after a thorough investigation, confirmed that Russian aircraft had indeed bombed Georgian territory.

Moscow also encouraged greater coordination between Tskhinvali and the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi. On September 7–8, 2002, Kokoity visited Sukhumi and signed a military union with Abkhazia against Georgia, based on Russian guidance and support.⁸ A few days later, on the first anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued an ultimatum to Georgia, which he characterized as a country "presenting a terrorist threat."⁹ Putin announced his readiness to invoke Article 51 of the UN Charter in order to use military force against Georgia.¹⁰ Six weeks later, on November 22, Shevardnadze responded to Russia's ultimatum. Speaking at the NATO summit in Prague, he declared Georgia's intentions to join NATO.¹¹

The spiral of escalation continued. By the end of 2002, Kokoity began filling positions in the governmental bureaucracy of South Ossetia with representatives of the Russian power ministries (e.g., defense, security, and intelligence, etc.). And in spite of sharp Georgian protests, the Russian government on December 25 reopened the railway line between Russia and Abkhazia which the CIS presidents themselves had closed down back in 1996.¹²

Hence by the end of 2002, Russia had gradually ratcheted up pressure on Shevardnadze's government. It had taken steps that threatened Georgia's territorial integrity, going as far as to threaten military action—while working to smear Georgia's reputation internationally as a den of terrorism.

Sabre-Rattling and the Battle for Adjara, January 2003–April 2004

On January 15, 2003, Eduard Kokoity again asked Vladimir Putin to recognize the independence of South Ossetia. The Russian leadership responded on February 2, 2003, by sending significant military equipment, including twelve T-55 tanks, via the Roki tunnel to South Ossetia.¹³ These were deployed near Java, in the northern parts of the territory, to which international observers did not have access. This delivery of modern heavy armaments from Russia to South Ossetia took place nine months before the Rose Revolution and Mikheil Saakashvili's ascent to power in November 2003.

The issue of Russian military bases was a major point of contention during this period, as the Russian government dragged its feet on implementing the commitments made at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit. During bilateral negotiations on the withdrawal of the Russian bases from Georgia that took place on February 18–19, Tbilisi demanded that the process be completed within three years, in other words, by 2006. Moscow claimed it could not withdraw the bases before 2014. Moscow exerted further pressure on Tbilisi by refusing to attend a routine meeting of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) on the Georgian-Ossetian conflict scheduled for February 20–21, 2003, in Vienna.¹⁴

Later that year, in July, the Russian government broke the international embargo on Abkhazia that had been in place since 1992–93 by sending a tourist ship from Sukhumi to Sochi. In July 2003 the de facto South Ossetian authorities walked out from the earlier agreed documents.¹⁵

Moscow's threats directed at Georgia continued. On October 2, 2003, Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Ivanov declared that Moscow did not exclude the possibility of initiating military strikes in various regions of the world "for its own security."¹⁶ Coming in the aftermath of the bombing of the Pankisi Gorge in August 2002, the statement was widely interpreted as a verbal preparation for another strike against Georgia—and as an attempt to benefit from a precedent set by the United States in Iraq.

Following the heavily rigged Georgian parliamentary elections of November 2, 2003, Shevardnadze sharply increased his telephone contact with Putin. Adjara leader Aslan Abashidze communicated with his Russian colleagues not only over the phone, but also in person during several visits to Moscow, the first of which took place on November 13. On November 23, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov, who had been sent by Putin as a mediator to Tbilisi, helped negotiate Shevardnadze's resignation.

That brought to power the triumvirate consisting of Mikheil Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania, and Nino Burjanadze.

The Rose Revolution led to even closer consultations between Moscow and Georgia's secessionist regions. At a Moscow session on November 29, Igor Ivanov discussed strategy and tactics with Russia's proxies in Georgia: Eduard Kokoity from South Ossetia, Aslan Abashidze from Adjara, and Abkhazian Prime Minister Raul Khadjimba (Abkhazian President Vladislav Ardzinba was unable to attend for health reasons). One of the decisions taken at the meeting was to accelerate the process of granting Russian citizenship to residents of these three Georgian territories. On December 5, the Russian mass media reported that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was preparing tens of thousands of blank passport for these regions. Four days later a new Russian visa regime, even more simplified than the existing one, was introduced in Adjara.¹⁷ Abashidze himself continued to be a frequent visitor to Moscow, traveling to the Russian capital on January 14, February 7, and March 3, 2004, making a total of five official visits since mid-November 2003.

On February 11, 2004, the first meeting between Putin and the newly elected Saakashvili took place in Moscow. The Russian president made two requests of his Georgian colleague: first, to refrain from demanding the withdrawal of Russian military bases in Georgia, and second, "to take care of" (i.e., to keep in place) Georgia's Minister of State Security, Valery Khaburdzania.¹⁸ Back in Tbilisi, five days later, on February 16, Saakashvili announced radical reforms of the Ministry of State Security, transferring Khaburdzania to the position of Deputy Prosecutor General. At the time of this chapter's writing, Khaburdzania was living in Moscow.

As Niklas Nilsson describes in his contribution to this volume, one of Saakashvili's first steps was to challenge Abashidze's semi-autonomous fiefdom in Adjara by orchestrating popular actions similar to those successfully employed during the Rose Revolution. Moscow reacted quickly. Once again Igor Ivanov was dispatched to Georgia to resolve the issue but he failed to pre-empt what became known as the "Adjara revolution." On May 6, 2004, Ivanov took Aslan Abashidze on board his plane and departed Batumi for Moscow. In a subsequent telephone conversation, Saakashvili boldly thanked Vladimir Putin for his contribution to the peaceful resolution of the crisis. Putin responded with the statement that: "Now remember, we did not intervene in Adjara, but you won't have any gifts from us in South Ossetia and Abkhazia."¹⁹

May 2004–April 2005: The Escalation of Tensions, Passports, Roads, Power Offensives, and the Battle for the Abkhaz Presidency

Following the Adjara crisis, Moscow further ratcheted up tensions with Tbilisi by expanding Russian military and administrative control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and accelerating the distribution of Russian passports in the two territories. Henceforth it could rationalize its actions in these two regions by the claim that it was merely defending its “citizens.” This period also saw growing violence in South Ossetia, as well as a botched Russian attempt to impose a new leader on Abkhazia, as it had done successfully in South Ossetia.

Only days following the Adjara crisis, the Russian president signed what appears to have been a secret decree outlining the Russian government’s main goals in South Ossetia. These included the construction of military bases near Java (Iziugomi) and in Tskhinvali, opening a special department at the military academy in Vladikavkaz for cadets from South Ossetia, and sending several dozen Russian military instructors to the territory. Moreover, it included transferring Russian officers to South Ossetia for routine military service, as well as the appointment of Russians to head South Ossetia’s ministries of defense, security, and law enforcement. The goal was to transform the badly organized, poorly equipped, and untrained South Ossetian militia into a 7,000-strong regular army.²⁰

On May 25, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs began distributing Russian passports to the South Ossetian population. On June 7, the South Ossetian Parliament asked the Russian Duma to recognize its independence and “to defend Russian citizens” living there.²¹ Significantly, Andrey Kokoshin, Chairman of the Duma’s committee for the CIS and compatriot affairs, now took up the cry that Russia was duty-bound to protect its new citizens.²²

Tensions rose in South Ossetia following the Georgian anti-smuggling operations described in Niklas Nilsson’s chapter to this volume. On June 2–6, Russia sent South Ossetia seventy five main battle T-72 tanks, twenty “Grad” multiple-launch rocket systems, thirty self-propelled artillery systems, and more than two-hundred “Igla” anti-aircraft weapons. Anatoly Barankevich, a Russian colonel with military experience in Afghanistan and Chechnya, was appointed Minister of Defense of South Ossetia.

On June 15, South Ossetian forces attempted to prevent the construction of a road connecting the Georgian village of Eredvi with the Georgian enclaves of Kurta and Tamarasheni, north of Tskhinvali. The next day, Russia cut the supply of electricity to Georgia. On July 8, Georgian authorities

captured nine trucks loaded with armaments and ammunition sent from Russia to South Ossetia.²³ The following day, fifty Georgian peacekeepers were disarmed and humiliatingly forced to their knees in the center of Tskhinvali, a scene videotaped and broadcast on the main Russian television channels;²⁴ the same night, the Georgian-controlled villages of Tamarasheni and Kurta were shelled, as were Georgian checkpoints near the villages.²⁵ Moscow’s infamous television anchor on the station ORT, Mikhail Leontiev, pronounced on air that “We’ve organized a trap for the Georgians. This time, it seems, they’ve walked into it.”²⁶ The next day, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs blamed Georgia for “organizing provocations” and promised to protect Russian citizens in South Ossetia. The same night, South Ossetian shelling wounded three more Georgian peacekeepers as well as one policeman. Exchanges of fire in South Ossetia continued until August 20, 2004, when Georgian troops left the region. By then nineteen Georgian soldiers and five Ossetians had been killed.²⁷

The September 2004 terrorist attack on the school in Beslan in the North Caucasus had been used for further centralization within the Russian government and to increase pressure on Georgia. While the terrorists responsible for Beslan arrived there using a road from Ingushetia, some Georgian journalists traveling there used the Georgian Military Highway. On September 4, the Russian government closed the Georgian Military Highway at the Larsi checkpoint, claiming a “terrorist threat.”²⁸ Three weeks later, while the Russian-Georgian border was still closed, Russia established a direct bus connection between the Russian city of Sochi and the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi.²⁹ Tensions in South Ossetia receded but Russian threats of force did not. On September 8 and 12, respectively, the Head of the Russian General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky and Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Ivanov announced Moscow’s readiness to undertake preventive strikes against targets outside Russia.

Events soon confirmed that these words were indeed intended for Georgian ears. Explosions on September 14 and 20 destroyed portions of the “Kartli-2” and “Kavkasioni” high voltage transmission lines on Georgian territory, cutting off electricity to large parts of Georgia. On October 9–10, more explosions severely damaged the “Kartli-2” and “Liakhvi” transmission lines and destroyed power lines in western Georgia. On October 20, Mikheil Saakashvili announced that Georgian special forces had neutralized a sabotage group from South Ossetia responsible for the explosions.³⁰

Meanwhile, Abkhazia was moving toward presidential elections. In late August, Putin hosted Abkhaz Prime minister Khadjimba in his residence in Sochi. This brought a sharp rebuke from the Georgian government, but also

indicated whom Moscow favored in the upcoming October 11 elections to choose a successor to the ailing Ardzinba. But his anointment by Putin failed to generate votes for Khadjimba, whom Sergey Bagapsh defeated handily. Moscow was so dissatisfied with this outcome that it rigged a standoff between the two contenders and their supporters, which continued until Putin summoned both candidates to Moscow on November 1.³¹ The Russians demanded that Bagapsh give in but he refused, and he continued to claim victory. Moscow promptly punished the whole province for Bagapsh's temerity, closing the Abkhazian portion of the Russian-Georgian border (November 15), halting railway communication with Abkhazia (December 1), and banning the import of Abkhazian agricultural produce (December 2). A special delegation from the Russian power ministries then headed to Sukhumi. After tiresome negotiations, a Bagapsh-Khadjimba power-sharing agreement was achieved on December 6 with Putin's approval.³² Moscow's failure to ensure the victory of its candidate indicated the limits to its powers and Abkhazia's relatively more independent-minded spirit, as compared with South Ossetia. Nonetheless, control over the defense and security sectors of the Abkhaz government was preserved.

Moscow also focused on filling all the key jobs in the power and law enforcement ministries in the regions with Russian officials. Similarly, Moscow named the head of the Federal Security Service's (FSB) office in the Russian Republic of Mordovia, Anatoly Yarovoy, as chairman of the South Ossetian KGB, still retaining its Soviet-era acronym. In March 2005, Lieutenant-General Anatoly Zaytsev, former deputy commander-in-chief of the Russian Trans-Baikal Military District, already Deputy Minister of Defense of Abkhazia, was also appointed Chief of the General Staff.³³ On April 25, the former Chief of Staff of the North Ossetian branch of the Russian Ministry of Interior, Mikhail Mindzaev, was appointed Minister of Interior of South Ossetia.³⁴ On July 4, 2005, Yuri Morozov, the commercial director of the Kursk fuel company in Russia and an old business partner of the South Ossetian leader, Kokoity, was named Prime Minister of South Ossetia. (For a full list of Russian officials in South Ossetia's government, see Box 4.1).

These appointments were accompanied by an increase in subversive activities by Russia in Georgia. In a remarkably brazen incident, an explosion on February 1, 2005, destroyed the police headquarters in the Georgian town of Gori, killing three policemen and wounding seventeen others. A five month-long investigation by the Georgian Ministry of Interior established that the explosion had been organized by the Russian military intelligence service (GRU).³⁵

Paralleling this, Moscow's embrace of the secessionist territories became ever more visible. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, during a visit to Tbilisi, refused to participate in a wreath laying ceremony at a monument to Georgians killed in the war in Abkhazia, while on April 3–4, 2005, in a very public manner, he received the foreign ministers of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria in Moscow as if they represented independent states. The next day Putin received Bagapsh and Kokoity at his residence in Sochi.

The personnel changes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia secured the Russian leadership's control over both secessionist provinces. From the beginning of 2005 it engaged the Russian telecom firm Megafon to build in South Ossetia a non-Georgian mobile communication system for use by the military and intelligence services.³⁶ Since 2004, moreover, the Russian government had substantially increased its economic support to both Georgian regions, gradually raising Russian subsidies. For example, South Ossetia's grew to almost 200 percent of its GDP in 2008. The main bulk of the subsidies in both regions went toward building-up their respective militaries, constituting up to 50 percent of Abkhazia's GDP and up to 150 percent of South Ossetia's GDP, probably setting a world record.³⁷

The Deadline for the War is Set, Offensives on Wine and Mineral Water Fronts, May 2005–August 2006

On May 30, 2005, Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Salome Zurbashvili and her Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, finally signed a joint communiqué on the timing and sequencing of the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Georgia. According to the document, Russian military personnel were to complete their withdrawal before the end of 2008. The decision was greeted with a sigh of relief on the Georgian side, and was considered a significant victory for Tbilisi in its efforts to secure the country's sovereignty. Virtually no one understood at the time that the deadline for the withdrawal of the Russian military bases from Batumi and Akhalkalaki was also the date the Russian leadership set for legalizing existing bases and establishing new ones in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In addition to the two existing Russian military bases in South Ossetia, Moscow in May 2006 began construction of a new military base in Elbanchita, two kilometers northeast of the town of Java.³⁸ The base was designed to host 2,500 military personnel. The storing facilities in Ochamchira and Gali bases were designed for storing military equipment, armaments, and fuel for 100,000 people.³⁹

By the beginning of 2006, Russian deliveries of military equipment to Abkhazia and South Ossetia reached such a level that the total amount of equipment, arms, and ammunition in these two regions, with a combined population of about 250,000, exceeded the total military capacity of Georgia, with a population of 4.5 million. By the beginning of 2008, the two breakaway regions had received at no cost more than twice the military equipment possessed by Georgia.⁴⁰ In February 2006, the Russian 58th Army of the North Caucasian Military district further conducted large-scale military exercises aimed at “providing immediate support to its peacekeepers battalion in South Ossetia,” with different units being deployed along the Transkam highway in the immediate proximity of the Roki tunnel and the Russian-Georgian border.

The staff changes in South Ossetia continued: on March 3, 2006, Russian FSB colonel Nikolai Dolgoplov, former head of the FSB branch in the Republic of Mari El, replaced Anatoly Yarvoy as head of the South Ossetian KGB. The same month, Kokoity filed a request to the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation for Russia to recognize South Ossetia’s independence.⁴¹

Moscow also began to use its economic leverage more purposefully. In December 2005, the heads of Russian energy companies doing business in Georgia were summoned to the Presidential Administration in Moscow and asked whether it was possible to stop the supply of energy across the border. The businessmen replied in the negative, but the matter did not end there. Days later, on January 22, 2006, a series of simultaneous explosions in the Russian Republic of North Ossetia badly damaged two gas pipelines and a power transmission line that connected Russia with Georgia.⁴² This deft move cut off the flow of Russian gas and electricity to Georgia (for which Georgia had paid) in the midst of one of the coldest winters of the decade. On January 26, another explosion destroyed high voltage transmission lines that provided electricity to eastern Georgia.

During 2006 Moscow worked persistently to inflict economic pain on Georgia in retaliation for Tbilisi’s efforts to counteract Russian subversion on its territory. In late March, the Georgian authorities detained a Russian GRU officer involved in espionage activities. Georgia discretely deported the officer but without publicizing the event. Nonetheless, on March 29, the Russian government, in what seemed to be a riposte to this move, banned the import of Georgian wine, citing health concerns.⁴³ This in turn was followed in May by bans on the popular Georgian Borjomi and Nagehlavi brands of bottled mineral water.⁴⁴ And lest the Georgians missed

the point, Minister of Defense Sergey Ivanov proclaimed that “Russia always has the right to a preventive strike.”⁴⁵

As this was happening, Moscow’s rhetoric on the secessionist territories grew more and more shrill. On January 31, 2006, during a conversation with journalists, Vladimir Putin noted that “if somebody assumes that Kosovo can achieve full state independence, then why should we refuse it to the Abkhaz and South Ossetians?” At the same time, the Russian president instructed Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov to come up with a universal legal formula on the independence of Kosovo that would be applicable in other similar cases.⁴⁶ In May, the Russian MFA began consultations with Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria on the status of their territories. In March an aide to the Russian prime minister stated that a decision on the unification of the two Ossetian republics had been taken “in principle.”⁴⁷

At a June 14 summit in Sukhumi, the leaders of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria signed a Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support as well as a Declaration on the Creation of a Commonwealth for Democracy and the Rights of Nations.⁴⁸ They agreed to provide military support to each other in case of an emergency, and to create joint peacekeeping troops in case Russian peacekeepers would leave their regions. They also proclaimed their loyalty to Moscow. Putin declared that the fate of those nations would be defined by the will of their peoples, based on their right of self-determination. Two weeks later, he stated that Russia would keep its peacekeeping troops in those regions “regardless of provocations.”⁴⁹ And on July 7, the Russian Federation Council adopted a law allowing the Russian president to deploy the country’s military forces outside Russian territory “to prevent international terrorist activity.”⁵⁰ Shortly thereafter South Ossetia’s Deputy Prime Minister Boris Chochiev announced that 98 percent of the region’s population had already acquired Russian citizenship. Tensions over the secessionist areas grew worse as Tbilisi in July restored effective control over the Kodori Gorge, the only part of Abkhazia in which it exercised any authority after 1993 (see Niklas Nilsson’s chapter for details).

The “Spy War,” September–November 2006

A new phase in the escalation began on September 27, 2006, when Georgian Minister of Interior Vano Merabishvili announced the discovery of a spy network coordinated by GRU officers. As a result of the counter-espionage operation, four Russian intelligence officers and eleven Geor-

gian citizens were arrested.⁵¹ The Russian MFA immediately summoned the Georgian ambassador to request an explanation. By way of response, Georgia's Ministry of Interior released audio and video recordings of five Georgian citizens confessing to having cooperated with Russian military intelligence, as well as footage showing Russian officers making cash deliveries to them. Former President Shevardnadze confirmed that the Georgian special services had long since accumulated evidence of Russian espionage activities on Georgian territory.

The Kremlin's reaction to the incident was nothing short of extraordinary: it demanded that the UN Security Council meet at once on the conflict in Abkhazia. At the same time, the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi stopped accepting visa applications from Georgian citizens; Russia recalled its ambassador in Tbilisi, Vyacheslav Kovalenko; and the Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations sent an airplane to Georgia to evacuate the families of Russian servicemen and diplomats. Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Ivanov called Georgia's actions "state banditry,"⁵² and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs darkly warned Russian citizens "not to visit Georgia." In response to all this, Georgia's parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze termed Russia's actions "political blackmail" while Saakashvili spoke of the Russian leadership's "hysteria."⁵³

On September 29, a Tbilisi court handed down prison sentences to four Russian intelligence officers and ten Georgian citizens. Three more Russian officers were found guilty in absentia of espionage. Russia responded by evacuating all remaining Russian citizens from Tbilisi,⁵⁴ putting Russia's army bases in Georgia on the highest alert, and announcing that it would cease withdrawing troops from the bases in Akhalkalaki and Batumi. Militia units and OMON riot police surrounded the Georgian Embassy in Moscow, Russian forces in the North Caucasus were put on the highest alert and moved up to the Russian-Georgian border, and the Russian Black Sea Fleet initiated large-scale maneuvers along Georgia's coast. Increasing the economic pressure, the head of the Russian Migration Service, Vyacheslav Postavnin, promised to deport most Georgian migrant laborers and to set up strict controls over the few who remained.⁵⁵

On October 2, Georgian authorities released the four Russian intelligence officers and sent them back to Russia. In a related move, they allowed Russian peacekeepers to patrol the Kodori Gorge, over which Georgian forces had only recently reasserted control. In what can be called a response to these concessions, Russia on October 3 unilaterally cut all communications with Georgia by air, sea, and rail, as well as the postal service—in violation of the Universal Postal Union's rules.⁵⁶ By these

means Moscow subjected Georgia to a total embargo. In Moscow, meanwhile, troops encircled the Georgian Embassy with metal barriers and severely restricted access to it. Lavrov explained that it was "forbidden to insult Russia while thousands of Georgian citizens work on its territory." Police, tax, fire, and other inspection teams were sent to the cafés, restaurants, hotels, entertainment centers, and other enterprises belonging to ethnic Georgians in Russia. Scheduled Georgian cultural performances were cancelled. Taxi drivers were encouraged to request identification from their passengers and refuse service if they turned out to be Georgians. And a massive anti-Georgian propaganda campaign unfolded in the Russian mass media.⁵⁷

By October 4 the anti-Georgian campaign had turned into a full-scale witch hunt. The State Duma adopted sanctions against Georgia, while the Federal Migration Service created a special "Georgian" department.⁵⁸ Georgians with multiple-entry visas who were already on Russian territory had their stays cut by half. The next day Putin instructed Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov to set up quotas for foreigners by countries of origin, and the schools were ordered to compile lists of children with Georgian last names.⁵⁹ At the same time as Prosecutor General Yuriy Chaika was announcing that the actions against Georgian citizens were "not excessive,"⁶⁰ the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs began checking into the income of the Georgian-born writer Boris Akunin (Georgiy Chkhartishvili), one of the best-loved contemporary Russian writers, while the Russian Accounting Chamber claimed to have found irregularities in the use of governmental funds by the Academy of Arts, headed by the Georgian-born Zurab Tseteli. On October 17, during his deportation from Russia, 58-year old Georgian citizen Tengiz Togonidze died from an asthma attack at Moscow's Domodedovo airport, after having failed to receive medical assistance.⁶¹ Russia began deporting Georgians from Russia on cargo aircraft while the Russian navy prevented foreign ships from entering Georgian ports.⁶²

Russia's proxies followed suit: on October 12, the South Ossetian Parliament asked the leaderships of the Russian republics of North Ossetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria to recognize Georgia's "moral and political responsibility for the genocide of South Ossetians in 1920 and in 1989–1992." Not to be outdone, the Abkhaz Parliament again petitioned the Russian leadership to recognize its independence and to establish an association agreement between the two countries. The request stated that more than ninety percent of Abkhazia's population were Russian citizens. In the North Caucasus, meanwhile, Chechen President Alu

Alkhanov stated that Chechens were ready to intervene in Abkhazia and South Ossetia if war should break out there.⁶³

At the CIS summit in Moscow on November 26, Saakashvili met three times with Putin. Based on their comments after the summit, they seemed to have made no progress on improving relations.

The Final Preparations for the Big War, December 2006–April 2008

By late 2006, it was becoming clear that none of the Russian leadership's many acts of pressure and intimidation were causing Georgia to abandon its course toward independent development, economic and legal reforms, as well as its efforts to restore its territorial integrity through peaceful means. Thus, in parallel with the re-election of Eduard Kokoity as President of South Ossetia on November 12, the Georgian government organized a rival presidential election in the part of South Ossetia that it controlled, that is, roughly half of the province. The victor was Dmitry Sanakoyev, an erstwhile leader of the separatist movement and a former Minister of Defense and Prime Minister of South Ossetia, who now sought a deal with the Georgian government.⁶⁴ The Russian State Duma responded by calling for the recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence,⁶⁵ while Russian General Andrey Laptev was appointed South Ossetia's Minister of Defense, replacing Anatoly Barankevich who became the head of South Ossetia's Security Council.

Events in Georgia were not occurring in isolation. As a part of the broader picture, Vladimir Putin delivered his now famous "Munich speech" at a conference on international security held in the Bavarian capital on February 10, 2007. His words were taken as a declaration of open confrontation with the West. Within two days Mikheil Saakashvili responded with the promise that Georgia would join NATO in 2009, to which Kokoity, on February 16, retorted that neither South Ossetia nor Abkhazia would ever join NATO. "Georgia may join NATO," he declared, "but without South Ossetia and Abkhazia."⁶⁶

Close observers were now openly predicting that the Georgian-Russian confrontation could end in war. On February 27, 2007, the Russian newspaper *Segodnya* published an article by an "independent military analyst" with the Ossetian name of Zaur Alborov, entitled "Why Georgia will lose the coming war." In his article, Alborov described in detail the likely actions of Russian regular forces in a future war with Georgia over South Ossetia, a war which actually broke out only seventeen months later. On March 10, Alborov published another article in which he predicted that the

independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be recognized in response to the deployment of an anti-missile system in Georgia. In October 2006, the independent Russian military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer, a contributor to this volume, expressed his fear that a Russo-Georgian war was now "practically inevitable."⁶⁷

While full-scale war would not happen for almost another one and a half years, the Russian leadership now crossed the line to direct military actions. On March 11, Russian military helicopters shelled Georgian administrative buildings in the Kodori Gorge in Upper Abkhazia.⁶⁸ During the whole of the next day Georgian villages in the Kodori Gorge were shelled from the Tkvarcheli district of Abkhazia, as well as from Russian helicopter gunships. This led to a rapid series of diplomatic moves. On March 13, the Georgian Parliament unanimously voted for Georgia's accession to NATO. Two days later, the U.S. Senate voted to support Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO membership (which was followed later by the U.S. Congress).⁶⁹ That same week Abkhazia's parliament again requested Russia to recognize its independence and to do so before Georgia joined NATO.

Efforts to improve the situation on the ground also came to nothing. On March 25, the co-chairs of the Joint Control Commission, at an informal meeting in Tskhinvali, agreed to hold an official meeting of the JCC in Tbilisi. After the meeting, a Georgian police car was ambushed, and two policemen killed. The investigation confirmed that the shelling came from the Ossetian side. The JCC meeting was cancelled. On March 29, the Russian MFA urged the Georgian government to drop its support for the alternative South Ossetian government of Dmitry Sanakoyev. On May 7, Kokoity announced the cessation of all negotiations with Georgia until Tbilisi ceased its contacts with Sanakoyev's administration in Kurta, only a few kilometers from Tskhinvali. Four days later, Kokoity declared the beginning of a full blockade of the Georgian villages of South Ossetia;⁷⁰ and on May 12, the Russian MFA accused Georgia of deploying prohibited anti-aircraft weapons in the conflict zone, an allegation that Georgia vehemently denied. Before an investigation could start, Ossetian trucks unloaded the weaponry and drove away.

By the summer of 2007 there were further signs that the Russian leadership had already decided to go to war. On June 27, Russia unexpectedly, and ahead of the agreed schedule, finished withdrawing its troops from its military base in Akhalkalaki. While it may seem counter-intuitive, it became clear in hindsight that Moscow wanted to avoid a situation in which Georgia could take Russian bases hostage. The next day Russian armored vehicles blocked the construction of a road leading to the Georgian enclave

of Nikozi-Avnevi. The Russian special envoy in South Ossetia, Yuri Popov, demanded an urgent meeting of the JCC, while Kokoity left for Moscow.

On July 13, Vladimir Putin signed a decree terminating Russia's participation in the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). He cited the U.S.'s plans for an anti-missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic as the reason for his decision. No one at the time noted that the decision on such a deployment had *not* been taken, and no part of the shield had been built (nor has it yet). It took another year before the true motive of this move became clear, namely, that it removed all limits on the deployment of Russian troops and equipment in the North Caucasus in preparation for a war against Georgia. Two weeks later, on July 27, 2007, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Zhukov declared that Abkhazia would participate in the construction of the infrastructure for the Sochi 2014 Winter Games.

That same summer what could be called the "dress rehearsal" for the war took place. On August 6, while most Western leaders were vacationing, two Russian Su-25 aircraft violated Georgian air space and bombed a radar station near Tsitelubani, on the border of the South Ossetian conflict zone. However, the missile failed to detonate, which enabled Western experts to inspect it and confirm its Russian origin.⁷¹ Georgia accused Russia over the incident while Russia brushed aside the charge, claiming that Georgia had staged the incident.

The escalation continued in Abkhazia as well. In violation of existing agreements Abkhazian troops held maneuvers in the lower part of the Kodori Gorge involving heavy equipment. The maneuvers, held on August 20–24, featured the Abkhaz army's expensive new military equipment, including planes and helicopters. During these maneuvers Russian aircraft repeatedly violated Georgian air space over Upper Abkhazia.⁷²

In a spectacular lightning operation completed on November 15, Russia completed the withdrawal of its troops from the bases in Georgia.⁷³ Thus, an action which Russian authorities had repeatedly described as requiring at least eleven years was executed in less than five months. As a result of this, if war against Georgia were to be launched, there would be no Russian troops that could be surrounded or taken prisoner and no Russian military equipment on Georgian territory that Georgians might easily seize. On December 3, the law terminating Russia's compliance with the CFE Treaty entered into force. This removed all limits on the deployment of Russian heavy military equipment on the southern flank of the European theater.

Within a week Russia began deploying additional troops and military equipment in the Ochamchire district of Abkhazia.⁷⁴

Early in February 2008, President Putin visited the Tsumadin district of Dagestan near the Mushak pass through the chief range of the Caucasus mountains. Russian TV aired a notable conversation that took place between Putin and his local host near a road that was under construction:

Putin: Where does this road lead?

Host: To Georgia.

Putin: Good. You need to accelerate its construction. We need one more corridor [to] there.⁷⁵

On February 21, 2008, just four days after Kosovo proclaimed its independence and with the process of its recognition proceeding at full speed, Vladimir Putin and Mikheil Saakashvili met for the last time as presidents. According to the Georgian president's account which he later made public, Putin told him that:

As for the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in this regard we shall respond not to you, but to the West—America and NATO, and in connection to Kosovo. You should not worry, it shouldn't bother you. What we do will not be directed against you but will be our response to them.⁷⁶

In a further sign of the Russian leadership's preparation for war, Russian general Vasily Lunev, a former Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the army in the Siberian Military District and former Military Commissar of Russia's Perm region, was appointed Minister of Defense of South Ossetia on March 1, 2008. On March 11, Colonel-General Sergey Makarov, one of the most experienced Russian officers, was appointed head of staff of the North Caucasian Military District (NCMD), and on May 31 became the commander-in-chief of the NCMD.

On March 4, the South Ossetian Parliament, and on March 7 the Abkhaz Parliament called on Russia, the CIS, and the UN to recognize the independence of the breakaway regions. On March 6, Russia unilaterally withdrew from the sanctions regime against Abkhazia that had been imposed at the CIS summit in January 19, 1996. Henceforth Russia considered itself free to maintain economic, financial, trade, transportation, and military contacts with the *de facto* Abkhaz authorities. On March 13, 2008, the Russian State Duma, in a closed session, discussed a report prepared by the Russian secret services and MFA on a strategy for achieving the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁷⁷ On March 21, 2008, it adopted a

special resolution endorsing both requests for recognition. Konstantin Zatulín, Deputy Head of the Duma's committee on CIS affairs, declared that recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia should not be postponed, since "The window of opportunity opened by the recognition of Kosovo will not last forever."⁷⁸ On April 14, an anonymous Russian diplomat commented in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* that, "The MFA recommended that the [Russian] President should recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia under two circumstances: if Georgia seriously undertakes to join NATO and in the case of war."⁷⁹

Meanwhile, at the NATO Bucharest Summit on April 3–5, German Chancellor Angela Merkel noted that countries with unresolved territorial conflicts could not join NATO. On the basis of this principle, which would have applied equally to West Germany at the time of its NATO accession, the summit denied both Georgia and Ukraine a Membership Action Plan. Twenty minutes after the Bucharest Communiqué was published, the Russian president issued a statement that, "We will provide effective assistance to South Ossetia and Abkhazia in return for NATO's decision."⁸⁰ The Head of the Russian Military Staff, for his part, added that "We will do everything [necessary] to prevent Georgia from joining NATO." A jubilant Putin sent letters to Bagapsh and Kokoity promising practical steps towards the removal of sanctions and the opening of diplomatic legal relations between Russia and the two republics.⁸¹ On April 8, Lavrov reiterated that Russia "would do its utmost not to allow Georgia and Ukraine into NATO."⁸²

The game changer came two days later. On April 16, the by then outgoing President Putin ordered the Russian government and Russian regional authorities to establish direct relations with the governments in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. The specific type of relationship which he proposed was virtually identical to that which existed between Moscow and the federal territories within Russia proper. Georgia noted that Putin's order amounted to Russia's full annexation of the two Georgian regions.⁸³ The EU, OSCE, NATO, U.S., UK, France, and Germany all condemned Putin's order and urged him to retract it.⁸⁴ On April 17, meanwhile, 300 additional Russian servicemen with heavy equipment arrived at the military base in Ochamchire in Abkhazia.

The Low Intensity War, April 20–July 28, 2008

On April 20, a Russian MIG-29 jet took off from the airbase in the Abkhaz town of Gudauta, shot down an unarmed Georgian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), and then withdrew northward into Russian airspace. A video

camera mounted on the Georgian drone recorded the attack and managed to send footage to the control tower before it was destroyed. Georgia accused Russia of armed aggression while Russia denied the charge. But an investigation undertaken by the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) confirmed that the attack had been carried out by a Russian jet.⁸⁵

According to the UN General Assembly's resolution 3314 of December 14, 1974, this action constituted a clear and distinct act of aggression. From the moment of the shooting down of the drone, Russia and Georgia can be said to have been in a state of war, which remained at a relatively low intensity until July 28.

Over the week starting on May 4 Russian and Abkhazian forces shot down five more Georgian drones. On May 6, General Vladimir Shamanov, Chief of the Russian Armed Forces Main Combat Training and Troop Service Directorate, stated that the Russian military would no longer allow Georgian planes to fly over the zones of conflict.

In violation of the CIS's agreement on peacekeeping operations, Moscow deployed paratroopers from the Novorossiysk Airborne Division to Abkhazia beginning in April 2008. In early May these forces were equipped with three "Buk" anti-aircraft complexes, fourteen additional D-30 self-propelled cannons, ten 122mm BM-30 multi-rocket launchers, twenty anti-tank cannons, 120 anti-tank rockets, two helicopters, and 180 Russian technical specialists to service this equipment.⁸⁶ The Russian Black Sea Fleet performed eight military exercises focusing on infantry shore landings. On May 1, Russian troops set up additional unauthorized checkpoints within Abkhazia on roads in the Tkvarcheli and Ochamchire districts. A week later, Moscow confirmed an increase of its troop numbers in Abkhazia from 1,997 to 2,542. Georgian sources, on the other hand, claimed that the real number of Russian troops on their territory was 4,000. On May 14, Sergey Bagapsh asked Russia to establish a permanent military presence in Abkhazia.

Early in May the Russian Air Force sent out a nationwide call to active duty of all former military helicopter pilots who had experience flying in mountainous areas. By the middle of the month the Air Force began a seventeen-day exercise for some of these new call-ups in Nalchik in the North Caucasus. A key element of the preparations began on May 26, when a 400-strong corps of Russian Railroad Troops was deployed in Abkhazia to repair and rehabilitate the rail line connecting Sukhumi and Ochamchire in the immediate proximity to the Abkhaz-Georgian border.

At the Bombora air base, meanwhile, three new hangars for planes and ammunition were hastily constructed.

Several new Russian Su-25 and Su-27 fighter aircraft had landed at the air base in Gudauta by June 6 and, at the same time, the Zelenchuk Mountainous Infantry Brigade of the NCMD began a ten-day exercise "to perfect its actions on unknown territory and at a distance from its permanent base." Soon thereafter, Georgian authorities detained a group of Russian peacekeepers in the Zugdidi district on the Georgian side of the Georgian-Abkhaz boundary, confiscating twenty anti-tank missiles and other heavy armament prohibited in the zone of conflict. In response, the deputy head of the Russian General Staff, General Alexander Burutin, promised a bloodletting the next time Georgia confiscated Russian arms since, according to him, Russian "peacekeepers" had the right to open fire.⁸⁷

On the last day of June, forces from the North Caucasus Military District, together with FSB troops, began week-long maneuvers in a forested mountain area adjoining the Georgian border. At the same time, Bagapsh closed the Abkhaz-Georgian border along the Inguri River, and a Russian military transport with 250 servicemen on board left the Russian city of Sochi for the port of Gagra in Abkhazia.

In June the de facto South Ossetian authorities set up an internet website called "Ossetian genocide." On July 2 and 8, the Ossetian information agency Osinform published articles by Zaur Alborov, in which he detailed the participation of units of the 58th Army "in the future operation to force Georgia to peace." On July 2, the Rosbalt information agency published an interview with Merab Kishmaria, the Abkhazian defense minister, in which he said that "his troops lacked neither arms, anti-aircraft guns, nor aviation..." and that "The Abkhaz army is being trained by Russian instructors... And this time I will get to Kutaisi."⁸⁸ On July 3, Abkhaz Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Shamba, in an interview with *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, ominously announced that Abkhazia "cannot guarantee not to launch a war." On the very next day the website Kavkaz-center confidently predicted a Russian attack on Georgia during August 2008:

Putin took the political decision to wage war against Georgia even before Medvedev's election as Russian president. Intensive preparations for the war have been under way already for several months.⁸⁹

That same day, on July 4, Kokoity announced a total mobilization in South Ossetia, but then cancelled it the same afternoon. The next day the editor-in-chief of the Forum.msk.ru website, having paid a visit to the

North Caucasus, reported that the war against Georgia is incredibly close and the army "wants a war."⁹⁰

On July 6, forces of the North Caucasus Military District started their "Caucasus-Border-2008" exercise. On July 7, exactly one month before the beginning of the war, both Russian peacekeeping battalions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia began simultaneously fortifying their positions.⁹¹ Next day, returning from a 10-day visit to South Ossetia, Alexander Dugin, self-proclaimed specialist in geopolitics with extensive contacts in the Russian military and special services, announced: "Ossetians are waiting for war. The country is ready for war. All the adult male population is mobilized. All patriotic Russian youth should come to South Ossetia to fight with weapons in their hands against our global fundamental enemies—Americans, NATO."⁹²

The same day, additional Russian anti-aircraft complexes and heavy armament were deployed in Abkhazia, while four Russian military jets violated Georgian air space over South Ossetia. In a remarkable move, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs openly acknowledged the violation, explaining that it had been done "to cool hot heads."⁹³ On July 10, both Bagapsh and Kokoity were called to Moscow for consultations with the Russian authorities. The Commander-in-chief of the NCMD, General Sergey Makarov, promised further military support to the Russian peacekeepers on the territory of Georgia.

Throughout the summer, there were numerous proposals for bilateral and multilateral negotiations to seek a peaceful settlement of the conflicts. Among such proposals were those by Georgia (throughout July until August 7), by the U.S. (on July 8), by Germany (on July 14, again on July 18, July 25, July 30, and on July 31), by the EU (on July 19 and on July 22-24), and by the OSCE and Finland (on July 25, and on July 30). The Russian, South Ossetian, and Abkhaz leaders, however, brushed them all aside.

Just as these proposals were being made, on July 15 NCMD troops began large-scale military maneuvers—"Kavkaz-2008"—with the participation of 8,000 servicemen from the army, interior forces, and the FSB, including 700 armored units, and with support from the Air Force and the Black Sea Fleet. The goal of the exercises was to perform an "operation of peace enforcement."⁹⁴ Participants in the exercises were given a leaflet entitled "Soldier! Know your probable enemy!" with a description of the Georgian forces, which is reproduced among the illustrations in this book.

On July 18, the airborne storm-trooper regiment of the 76th Pskov Airborne Division took up positions on the Roki and Mamisson passes of the main Caucasian massif, while the airborne regiment of the Volgograd In-

fantry Division was deployed in Krasnodar Kray. On July 20, an infantry battalion with fourteen Armored Personnel Carriers entered the lower part of the Kodori Gorge, and three days later the 135th Infantry Regiment of the 19th Vladikavkaz Infantry Division replaced the Pskov paratroopers on the Roki pass. On July 25, a special medical detachment set up a field hospital named "Tarskoye" that could handle 300 wounded soldiers per day. "At the request of local authorities" the hospital remained in place after the exercises were completed "...in order to serve the local population," as the announcement claimed. Meanwhile, the construction of the Ugadangi base near Java was completed the following next day.

In a remarkably candid statement of Russia's intentions, Teimuraz Mamsurov, head of the region of North Ossetia in Russia, promised the readers of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on July 26 that Russian troops

will enter Georgia to protect Russian citizens and help peacekeepers... There is armor, including tanks, at the northern gate of the Roki tunnel. They are deployed for demonstration purposes, but [their function is] not just to stand there...⁹⁵

Two days later the magazine *Ogonyok* reported that between forty-five and fifty railway cars with tanks had reached the Gali district on the Abkhaz-Georgian border, and that echelons were moving day and night.⁹⁶ An otherwise unidentified colonel from the "peacekeeping forces" swaggeringly boasted that the quantity of armaments and ammunition in Abkhazia had reached the level "necessary to wage a conflict for several years. I feel that something will happen," he added.⁹⁷ Finally, on July 30, six days ahead of schedule, the Russian railway corps completed repairs to the Sukhumi-Ochamchire railway. The scene was now set for war. Now all that was necessary was the spark to start it.

Launching the Big War, July 28–August 6, 2008

On July 28, South Ossetian forces for the first time fired at the joint peacekeeping forces and OSCE observers. The next day, also for the first time, South Ossetian forces shelled villages with ethnically mixed populations that were under Georgian control.⁹⁸

In the morning of August 1, a Georgian police truck was blown up, seriously wounding five policemen. Later an airplane loaded with Russian journalists ready and eager to report on a war that had not yet begun departed Moscow for Tskhinvali. Early the next morning, a second group of Russian journalists departed the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala for

South Ossetia. Foreign journalists, with the exception of only group from the Ukrainian TV channel Inter, were banned from entering South Ossetia. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed this was "due to problems with their documents." The Russian journalists began arriving in Tskhinvali in the morning of August 2. By August 7, their number had reached fifty (see Box 4.2).⁹⁹

Ossetian and Georgian forces exchanged fire from the afternoon of August 1 until the next morning. For the first time since 2004, the South Ossetian side used the large-caliber artillery exceeding 100 mm which the CIS had prohibited from the zone of conflict.

On August 2, the North Caucasus military exercise "Kavkaz-2008" officially ended. But troops participating in the maneuvers did not leave their positions. Moreover, over the course of this day, several regular units began infiltrating the territory of South Ossetia. The Russian and Ossetian "peacekeeping" battalions were illegally increased from 530 to 850 servicemen each, but the Georgians' battalion remained at its level of 530 troops. South Ossetia now began moving civilians from Tskhinvali and the surrounding villages. By midnight of August 7, more than 20,000 civilians from South Ossetia had been evacuated to Russia. This number constituted more than ninety percent of the population of the future area of battle and about forty percent of the total population of South Ossetia, a proportion that almost exactly mirrored the one registered in Kosovo when Kosovars fled the Serb army in 1999.

On August 2, Sergey Mironov, Teimuraz Mamsurov, and Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Airborne Troops Valery Evtukhovich all simultaneously issued statements promising that Russian forces would intervene in Georgia "for the protection of Russian citizens and to help the peacekeepers." On August 3, the information agency Osinform published an article entitled "If war happens tomorrow," which assumed that the start of operations was imminent.

The same day, Russian Deputy Minister of Defense Nikolai Pankov, the Deputy Chief of Military Intelligence, and Commander-in-Chief of the 58th Army Anatoly Khrulev arrived in Tskhinvali, where they met with the military and political leadership of South Ossetia, including Kokoity, Morozov, Lunev, Mindzaev, Chochiev, Boris Attoev, as well as the commanders of the Russian and Ossetian peacekeepers Marat Kulakhmetov and Konstantin Friev. Georgian sources confirm that the purpose of the meeting was to finalize the plan of action for the 58th Army units in South Ossetia.¹⁰⁰ Simultaneously with this event, the Security Council of Abkhazia had been called to a meeting in Sukhumi as well.

Meanwhile, mobilization of “volunteers” and Cossacks started in the North Caucasus, with the first 300 mercenaries crossing the international Russian-Georgian border, arriving on August 4 in South Ossetia. As the Supreme Ataman of the Union of the Russian Cossacks, and at the same time deputy governor of the Rostov oblast, Victor Vodolatskiy explained, the mobilization of volunteers was centrally planned and officially performed via drafting stations at the regional and district military commissariats across Russia’s North Caucasus. Most of volunteers were assigned to the 19th Infantry Division of the NCMD and to the North Ossetian peacekeeping battalion, while others signed direct contracts with the South Ossetia’s Ministry of Defense (the existence of which, by the way, was also illegal according to the Dagomys or Sochi agreement).¹⁰¹

On August 4, NCMD troops moved to the immediate proximity of the international Russian-Georgian border, occupied Roki and Mamison passes, and deployed in the Zaramag area in order “to be able to immediately cross the border to provide assistance to the peacekeepers in South Ossetia.”¹⁰² The same day, medical and communications units of the 58th Army arrived in South Ossetia and eleven “Gvozdika” artillery gunships were relocated from Java to Tskhinvali. The number of Russian regular troops in South Ossetia had now reached approximately 1,200. AWACS-type military aircraft arrived at the Mozdok air base, and several Tu-22M3 heavy bombers were relocated from their permanent base near Novgorod to the southern region of Saratov.¹⁰³

In the midst of these intensive preparations, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on August 4 published an article entitled “The Postponed War,” while South Ossetia’s Radio declared confidently that “the war could begin tomorrow.”¹⁰⁴ In a seemingly coordinated move from Sukhumi, Sergey Bagapsh informed that if war broke out, Abkhazia “would not stand on the sidelines.”¹⁰⁵

On August 5, three days before the attack was launched, several more armored units, forty artillery systems, and an intelligence battalion of the 33rd Special Airborne Storm-trooper Brigade with full armaments and ammunition moved south across the Russian-Georgian border via the Roki tunnel into South Ossetia.¹⁰⁶ Thirty more artillery systems were transferred into Georgia via the Kodori Gorge.

It was becoming clear that the objectives of the Russian/Abkhaz/South Ossetian coalition in the looming war went far beyond the contested territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. South Ossetia’s Minister of Interior Mikhail Mindzaev said that South Ossetia might claim territories in Georgia, including Borjomi and Bakuriani.¹⁰⁷ In an interview with *Nezavisi-*

maya Gazeta on August 5, Abkhaz Foreign Minister Shamba did not exclude a possibility of opening the second front against Georgia. An unidentified source in the Abkhaz intelligence services predicted that “specially trained diversionaries may blow up the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.”¹⁰⁸ And indeed, in strict confirmation of that prediction, an explosion near the Turkish city of Erzincan temporarily closed the BTC pipeline the following morning.

By the evening of August 5, the following Russian units were deployed at the northern gate of the Roki tunnel: the 135th and 693rd Infantry Regiments of the 19th Division of the 58th Army, the 104th and 234th Airborne Assault Regiments of 76th Airborne Division, the 217th Airborne Regiment of the 96th Airborne Division, and the 31st Special Airborne Regiment. Altogether, these included 11,693 servicemen, 891 armored units, and 138 units of artillery.¹⁰⁹ The Tersk and Don Cossacks formed detachments and sent them to South Ossetia.

Beginning on August 6, all offices and shops in Tskhinvali were closed. The evacuation of civilians to Russia proceeded apace, while mercenaries and Russian journalists arrived from the opposite direction. That same day South Ossetian forces opened mortar fire on the villages of Eredvi, Prisi, Avnevi, Dwani, and Nuli. The following fire exchange led to the injuring of several people on both sides. *Izvestia* proudly stated that volunteers were arriving to South Ossetia from as far away as Moscow, while Radio Ossetia issued a special announcement saying that the war had begun.¹¹⁰

By the evening of August 6, the leadership of the NCMD was deployed to Java, while the leadership of the Leningrad Military District was deployed in the lower part of the Kodori Gorge.¹¹¹ The correspondent of the APN information agency reported from Vladikavkaz: “All the Republic... all people saw (beginning on the evening of August 6) the movement of a huge amount of troops in the direction of the [Roki] tunnel.”¹¹²

The correspondent of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, rushing from Vladikavkaz to Tskhinvali in order not to miss the beginning of the unfolding war, reported what she saw with her own eyes:

Russia is pulling serious military forces to the Georgian border. All Transkam from Alagir to Zaramag is full with military columns, trucks with servicemen, armor. The military still talk about military exercises, but there is no doubt that Russia demonstrates its decisiveness to defend its citizens in South Ossetia. Just up to performing of a peace enforcement operation.¹¹³

Georgian President Saakashvili requested an urgent telephone conversation with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to discuss the dangerous

turn of events in South Ossetia and in Russian-Georgian relations. The Russian Foreign Ministry responded with the following cold statement: "The situation is not yet ready for the Presidents to talk to each other. Let the Presidents speak later."¹¹⁴

Table 4.1

Who was first?

This comparison is constructed with the pure purpose to identify which side—the Russia-Abkhazia-South Ossetia Coalition or Georgia—was first in committing actions that can be considered an aggression based on the definition given by the UN General Assembly Resolution #3314 on December 14, 1974. Considering South Ossetia and Abkhazia as de facto actors allied with Russia is an observation of factual relations, which is unrelated to their international legal status.

Out of 46 actions that are believed to be acts of aggression, 45 were performed first by the Coalition (Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia). One action was performed first by Georgia before the Coalition.

Actions performed by each party for the first time	Coalition (Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia)	Georgia
• Air force bombing of the territory of another party	August 23, 2002	August 8, 2008
• Deployment of battle tanks on the territory of South Ossetia	February 3, 2003	August 7, 2008
• Building of military base on the territory of South Ossetia	May, 2004	Absent
• Artillery shelling of the territory of another party	March 12, 2007	August 1, 2008
• Exit from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE)	July 14, 2007	Absent
• Exit from the CIS regime of sanctions in relevance to Abkhazia	March 6, 2008	Absent
• De-facto recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (establishment of direct contacts with the authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia)	April 16, 2008	Absent
• Shooting down of aircraft of another party	April 20, 2008	August 8, 2008
• Deployment in Abkhazia of the regular military forces not agreed with the other party	April 30, 2008	Absent

• Deployment in Abkhazia of military personnel in excess of the agreed limits	May 26, 2008	Absent
• Wounding a serviceman of another party since beginning of 2008	July 3, 2008	August 1, 2008
• Invasion of a group of aircrafts into the airspace of another party	July 9, 2008	August 8, 2008
• Obstruction of the activity of peacekeeping forces of another party	July 27, 2008	August 8, 2008
• Firing in the direction of the OSCE observers	July 28, 2008	August 8, 2008
• Artillery shelling of the territory of another party since beginning of 2008	July 29, 2008	August 1, 2008
• Casualty of a serviceman (law enforcement officer, or policeman) of another party since beginning of 2008	August 6, 2008	August 1, 2008
• Deployment of heavy weaponry in the zone of conflict in South Ossetia	August 1, 2008	August 7, 2008 9:00 P.M.
• Use of heavy weaponry prohibited in the zone of conflict and confirmed by observers	August 1-2, 2008	August 7, 2008, 11:50 P.M.
• Mass evacuation of civilians from the zone of conflict	August 2, 2008	August 7, 2008
• Mass arrival of journalists representing the media of the party into the zone of conflict	August 2, 2008	August 8, 2008
• Arrival of military commanders who would be leading the operation into the zone of conflict	August 3, 2008, morning	August 6, 2008
• Meeting of a security council (or similar type meeting) that would lead to the decision to launch military operations	August 3, 2008, morning	August 7, 2008, 1:00 P.M.
• Beginning of mass mobilization	August 3, 2008	August 8, 2008, 8:00 A.M.
• Confirmed arrival of mercenaries (volunteers) into the zone of conflict	August 4, 2008	Absent/No data
• Presence of regular military forces of Russia and Georgia on the territory of South Ossetia	No later than August 3, 2008	August 7, 2008, 9:00 P.M.

• Arrival of medical units and communication units of the regular military forces into the zone of conflict	August 4, 2008	August 7, 2008 9:00 P.M.
• Regular description of the situation by the media of the parties as a full-scale war	August 3, 2008	August 8, 2008
• Issue of order of a chief of military (or security) body to destroy (to raze down) a settlement (village) on the territory of another party	August 5, 2008	Absent
• Increase in the number of peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia in excess of agreed limits	No later than August 7, 2008	Absent /No data
• Confirmed crossing of Russian-Georgian international border by regular troops of the opposite party	August 7, 2008, 3:52 A.M.	Absent
• Public statement of a political leader of the party to "clean" the members of another ethnic group from the zone of conflict	August 7, 2008, 10:50 A.M.	Absent
• Order to put military forces on the highest alert	August 7, 2008, no later 11:00 A.M.	August 7, 2008, 2:00 P.M.
• Causing death to a civilian person of another party	August 7, 2008, 2:00 P.M.	August 8, 2008, 2:00 A.M.
• Causing death to a serviceman of peacekeeping forces of another party	August 7, 2008, 2:00 P.M.	August 8, 2008, 8:00 A.M.
• Implementation of unilateral cease-fire on August 7, 2008	Absent	August 7, 2008, 5:10 P.M.
• Announcement of unilateral cease-fire on August 7, 2008	Absent	August 7, 2008, 6:40 P.M.
• Shelling positions of another party after implementation of unilateral cease-fire on August 7, 2008	August 7, 2008, 8:40 P.M.	August 7, 2008, 11:50 P.M.
• Order to engage into military operations given to peacekeeping troops	August 8, 2008, 00:30 A.M.	Absent
• Fighting positions adopted by peacekeeping troops	August 8, 2008, 1:00 A.M.	Absent

• Engagement in military operations by peacekeeping troops	August 8, 2008, no later than 06:20 A.M.	Absent
• Use of tactical missile against the other party	August 8, 2008, 7:30 A.M.	Absent
• Announcement of cease-fire, its implementation, creation of a humanitarian corridor for transportation of wounded and civilians out of zone of action	Absent	August 8, 2008, 3.00-6.00 P.M.
• Blockade of maritime routes of the other party	August 8, 2008, 4:40 P.M.	Absent
• Implementation of ethnic cleansing of the opposite party	Since August 9, 2008	Absent
• Marine troops landing into the zone of conflict	August 10, 2008, 1:07 A.M.	Absent
• De jure recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia	August 26, 2008	Absent

Source: <http://aillarionov.livejournal.com/70169.html>

*Types, dates, and time of actions considered as acts of aggression according to the UN GA #3314 resolution performed by each party for the first time

Box 4.1

Russian Citizens in the Military and Political Leadership of South Ossetia, 2004–08

Barankevich, Anatoly Konstantinovich, lieutenant-general; Minister of Defense of South Ossetia, July 6, 2004–December 10, 2006; Secretary of Security Council of South Ossetia, December 11, 2006–October 3, 2008. Graduated from Ussuriysk Suvorov Military College, the Far East Military Command College, the Frunze Military Academy. Served in the Siberian Military District, the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany, in Volga and North Caucasus Military Districts. Participated in the Soviet war in Afghanistan, first and second Chechen wars. Was deputy military commissar in Chechnya, and in Stavropol kray.

Yarovoy, Anatoly, FSB major-general; Chairman of KGB of South Ossetia, January 17, 2005–March 2, 2006. Before his appointment to South Ossetia was a Head of the FSB Branch in the Republic of Mordovia, March 10, 2001–December 27, 2004.

Chebodarev, Oleg, FSB colonel, chief of the State Border Guard of South Ossetia since 2005.

Mindzaev, Michail, FSB lieutenant-general; Minister of Interior, April 26, 2005–August 18, 2008. Was a deputy chief of staff in the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of the North Ossetia – Alania. In 2004 in Beslan was commander of the Alpha Group's special forces of the Russian FSB.

Morozov, Yuri Ionovich, prime minister of South Ossetia, July 5, 2005 – August 18, 2008. Graduated from the Ufa Oil Institute. Before his appointment in the government of South Ossetia was a commercial director of Kursk fuel company.

Dolgopolov, Nikolai Vasiljevich, FSB major-general, Chairman of KGB of South Ossetia, March 3, 2006–November 8, 2006. Before his appointment in South Ossetia was a Chief of the FSB Branch in the Republic of Mari El.

Attoev, Boris Majitovich, FSB lieutenant-general, Chairman of KGB of South Ossetia since November 9, 2006. Before his appointment in South Ossetia was a Chief of FSB Branch in the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic, also senior fellow at the FSB central directorate in Moscow. Participated in the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Lapteev, Andrey Ivanovich, lieutenant-general, Minister of Defense of South Ossetia, December 11, 2006–February 28, 2008.

Kotoev, Vladimir Kuzmich, FSB colonel. Chairman of State Protection Guard, since 2007. Participated in wars in Chechnya and Bosnia.

Lunev, Vasily Vasiljevich, lieutenant-general, Minister of Defense of South Ossetia, March 1, 2008–August 18, 2008, from August 9 also Commander-in-chief of the 58th Army of the North Caucasian Military District. Graduated from the Moscow High Military College, the Frunze Military Academy, the Military Academy of the General Staff. Promoted from a platoon commander of an infantry regiment to the first deputy commander-in-chief of the army in the Siberian Military District. Served in the Far East, Siberia, Urals, also in Syria as a military adviser. Before his appointment in South Ossetia was a military commissar in Perm Krai.

Tanaev, Yury Anvarovich, major-general, Minister of Defense in South Ossetia since October 31. Graduated from the Minsk Suvorov Military College. Before his appointment to South Ossetia was a chief of the intelligence department of the staff in the Urals Military District.

Bulatsev, Aslanbek Soltanovich, FSB colonel, prime minister of South Ossetia since October 31, 2008. Before his appointment to South Ossetia was a chief of Federal Taxation Service in the Republic of North Ossetia - Alania, earlier was a chief of FSB Finance Department in the Republic of North Ossetia.

Bolshakov, Alexander Michailovich, Chief of the South Ossetia Presidential Administration since October 31, 2008. Graduated from the Vladimir State Pedagogical Institute. Over 15 years he occupied leading positions in the Party and executive bodies of the Vladimir oblast administration. Was a deputy director of OAO "Zavod Autopribor" (city Vladimir). Before his appointment to South Ossetia was a deputy governor, head of the Ulyanovsk oblast administration, a member of the ruling party United Russia. During the presidential election campaign, March 2, 2008, was a head of regional staff of the presidential candidate Dmitry Medvedev.

Box 4.2

Tskhinvali Pool of Russian Journalists**1) Said-Husein Tsarnaev, journalist with RIAN and Reuters:**

"We've arrived in Tskhinvali three days prior to the attack on the city... We've got accommodations in the hotel "Alan." At once, I've noticed about fifty journalists of leading TV channels and newspapers gathered in the hotel. I have experience with two Chechen campaigns and such a crowd of colleagues at the headquarters of peacekeeping forces I took as a disturbing signal."

2) Irina Kuksenkova, journalist with Moskovsky Komsomolets:

"50 Russian journalists, stuck in the bunker of peacekeepers in Tskhinvali, on Friday [on August 8. – A.I.] have called international human rights protecting organizations, the Red Cross, OSCE and the United Nations with the request to organize a corridor for evacuation from the city. This request, as it is informed on the web-site of 'The Nezavisimaya Gazeta,' has been delivered to the secretary of Georgian Security Council, Kahi Lomaya".

3) The list of the Russian journalists present in Tskhinvali by 23.30 on August 7, 2008:*Arrived on August 2:*

1. Olga Kiriy – correspondent, 1st TV channel, Southern Bureau
2. Olga Kuznetsova – operator, 1st TV channel, Southern Bureau
3. Anton Stepanenko – correspondent, 1st TV channel, Moscow
4. Kiril Butyrin – operator, 1st TV channel, Moscow.
5. Andrey Chistjakov – correspondent, TV channel "Rossiya"
6. Evgeniy Radaev, TV channel "Rossiya".
7. Damir Zakirov – video engineer, TV channel "Rossiya"
8. NN, TV channel "Rossiya"
9. NN, TV channel "Rossiya"
10. Ruslan Gusarov – correspondent, NTV
11. Vadim Goncharov – operator, NTV
12. Peter Gaseev – producer, NTV, resident of Tskhinvali

Arrived on August 5, replacing the previous group:

13. Evgeniy Poddubny – correspondent, TVTS
14. Alexey Komarov – operator, TVTS
15. Alexey Stepanov-Molodov, TVTS

Arrived on August 5:

16. Artem Vasnev – correspondent, Ren-TV
17. Roman Simbukhovskiy – operator, Ren-TV
18. Stanislav Hudiev – correspondent, MTRK “Mir”
19. Operator, MTRK “Mir”.
20. Evgeniy Lukinov – correspondent, 5th channel
21. Operator, 5th channel
22. Alexey – technician on sound, 5th channel
23. Correspondent, Russia Today
24. Alexander – operator, Russia Today
25. Makhmud – correspondent of the Arab speaking version of Russia Today
26. Alan Bulkata (aka - Alan Tsorian) – correspondent, RIAN.
27. Said Tsarnaev – freelance photo correspondent, RIAN, also with “Reuters”
28. Sergey Uzakov – photo correspondent, ITAR-TASS.
30. Alexey Shtokal – correspondent, Interfax
31. Andrey Tadtaev – correspondent, Regnum

Arrived on August 6:

32. Ruslan Yarmolyuk – correspondent, TV “Inter” (Ukraine)
33. Jury Romanjuk – operator, TV “Inter” (Ukraine)
34. Marina Perevozkina – correspondent, Nezavisimaya Gazeta
35. Irina Kuksenkova – correspondent, Moskovskiy Komsomolets
35. Yuri Snegirev – correspondent, Izvestiya
36. Michael Romanov – correspondent, The New Times

Sources: Alexander Kovytkov, “War Notes. South Ossetia,” Rostov Na Donu: Fenix, 2008, p. 56; Irina Kuksenkova, “Welcome to hell!” Moskovsky Komsomolets, www.mk.ru/blogs/idmk/2008/08/11/mk-daily/365829/; <http://davnym-davno.livejournal.com/6488.html>

5

Georgia’s Rose Revolution: The Break with the Past

Niklas Nilsson

The Rise of the “Young Reformers”

The political system established in Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze rested on a sophisticated “balancing of interests,” where former members of the Soviet elite were balanced against a faction of young, reform-oriented liberals, who had often worked or studied in the West. This system strengthened the president’s position as an indispensable arbiter between various interest groups. At the same time, this provided for a slow and complicated decision-making process, avoiding tough decisions, which would risk alienating either faction. While these groupings were not clear-cut, the “young reformer” camp headed by Zurab Zhvania was a forthcoming faction in Shevardnadze’s ruling party, the Citizens’ Union of Georgia (CUG), and was active in recruiting Western-educated Georgians into government positions, one of whom was Mikheil Saakashvili, who joined the CUG in 1995, became Minister of Justice in 2000, but resigned in 2001.¹

A crucial precondition for the Rose Revolution was the system of “weak authoritarianism” under Shevardnadze’s presidency. This system allowed the “liberal” factions of the CUG to develop reform-oriented agendas. They could, furthermore, establish their own support platforms, and eventually defect from the CUG and form opposition parties of their own.² Mikheil Saakashvili thus formed the National Movement in 2001. Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze formed the United Democrats in November 2002, running in the 2003 elections in the bloc named the “Burjanadze-Democrats.” The New Rights Party, which had left the parliamentary majority faction in 2000, and the Labor Party constituted fairly strong opposition forces in parallel with the former young reformist camp in the CUG government, while the Industrialists appeared a moderate force.³ All these parties revolved around the strong personalities of their leaders. The political system under Shevardnadze provided for a fairly free media, where the

