

Georgia's Saakashvili Boasts U.S.-U.K. Approval for Showdown

by Rachel Douglas

Michael Saakashvili, whose accession to power in Georgia at the end of last year was a project of mega-speculator and geopolitics dabbler George Soros, is provoking more tension around South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two districts in Georgia, bordering on Russia, which have been autonomous for the past decade. Both areas were the scene of bloody combat in the early 1990s, leading to an uneasy truce, under which the Georgian central government stayed out and Russian forces policed the ceasefire.

The roots and current state of the conflicts are complex, involving the legacy of Stalin's nationalities policy in the Soviet Union, the panoply of separatist ethnic movements across the Caucasus (many of them promoted by foreign intelligence agencies for their own perceived advantage), and the economic interests of criminal clans in the region. After seizing power, Saakashvili first ousted Aslan Abashidze's leadership in semi-autonomous Ajaria. Now he is moving to retake South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but the outcome is uncertain and threatens to be bloody.

During July, incidents occurred between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia, when Georgian forces were sent to the border area, officially to fight smuggling. Russian trucks, protected by Russian military units, were among the targets. Several rounds of South Ossetian-Georgian talks were inconclusive. On July 20, speaking in Ajaria, Saakashvili threatened South Ossetia and Russia with abrogation of the 1992 Dagomys Agreements, which had ended the war between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali and established the Russian peacekeeping contingent.

South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoyev rejoined: "Denunciation of the Dagomys Agreements means war. . . . And he [Saakashvili] is saying this upon his return from Britain, a country with centuries-old democratic traditions." On July 18, Saakashvili made a quick, unannounced visit to South Ossetia; the Russian Foreign Ministry protested that it had not been notified.

Saakashvili escalated again on August 3, declaring that any foreign ships arriving in Sukhumi or other Abkhazian ports, including boatloads of Russian tourists on the popular Sochi-Sukhumi route, could be fired on by Georgia without warning. After the July 31 shelling of a Turkish cargo ship off the Abkhazian coast, that autonomous area's leaders had

broken off talks with Tbilisi, stating that Georgia had "embarked upon a policy of wrecking the process of peaceful settlement of conflicts." On August 3 in South Ossetia, Georgian snipers fired on the motorcade of Andrei Kokoshin, head of the Defense Committee of Russia's State Duma.

Georgia's Minister for Conflict Resolution, Giorgi Khaindrava, in Moscow for talks on August 10, said that Saakashvili never made a threat to shoot tourists, but was the victim of a mistranslation into Russian. Khaindrava said that Saakashvili had merely been warning vacationers that Abkhazia was a zone of conflict, where "shooting could break out at any moment." Meanwhile, Russia's own master of provocation, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, ostentatiously travelled to Abkhazia by motorcade and then boat, tempting the Georgians and, at one point, reporting back to Moscow that he had been fired on.

Foreign Patrons

Interspersed with these actions, Saakashvili visited London and Washington. In London on July 14, he said that Georgia seeks a close relationship not only with the USA, but also Britain, and urged Defense Secretary Jeff Hoon to send more British specialists to Georgia and take Georgian officers for training in Britain. When Kokoyev warned of war, Saakashvili boasted, "The British SAS can easily smash the GRU spetsnaz" (Russian special forces). On August 2, after Saakashvili visited Israel with his foreign and defense ministers, it was announced that Georgia will import Israeli light weaponry. Then Saakashvili came to Washington and, at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 5, issued his latest warning: Russian tourists should not visit Abkhazia, which he called "not a vacation area, but a war zone from which 300,000 Georgians have been expelled."

Saakashvili met with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice on August 4 and 5. His talks with Rumsfeld were joined by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Myers and Rumsfeld's foreign policy advisor Myra Ricardel, who had both met with Saakashvili in December 2003—after he seized power, but before he staged his dubious 95 percent vote in Presidential elections.

A Pentagon spokesman told the Moscow newspaper *Kommersant* that the meeting focussed on the recent NATO summit in Istanbul, where the Alliance decided to "concentrate on the problems of the Caucasus and Central Asia," and the possibility deployment of a Georgian contingent to Afghanistan.

The Russian Duma issued a warning Aug. 5, that the conflict in Georgia could develop into a large-scale military confrontation, with Russian involvement. There were new shooting incidents in South Ossetia on August 10, even as Khaindrava and Georgian Defense Minister Giorgi Baramidze had talks in Moscow on the situation in the two regions.