

NATO-Mitglieder bzw. ihrer Gesellschaften vor politischem Zwang zum Kernbereich des Artikels 5 gehöre. Daher führe der Kampf gegen eine terroristische Bedrohung die Allianz – wenn auch unter veränderten Vorzeichen – wieder an ihren Beginn zurück. Eine solche strategische Besinnung sei nicht nur unter sicherheitspolitischen Aspekten dringend geboten, sondern gewährleiste auch die notwendige Legitimation der NATO in den Mitgliedstaaten, die durch die Vielzahl von Auslandseinsätzen in den vergangenen Jahren nicht (mehr) hergestellt werden konnte. Unter dem Überbegriff »*Transatlantic Homeland Defense*« plädieren diese Beobachter daher für eine multidimensionale Strategie der Allianz, die Elemente diplomatischer, finanzieller, wirtschaftlicher, geheimdienstlicher und polizeilicher

Zusammenarbeit umfassen soll. Konkret soll die Zivilverteidigung in die Allianz doktrin mit dem Ziel aufgenommen werden, das Territorium der NATO vor terroristischen Angriffen zu schützen.²⁵ Ob diese Vorschläge jedoch geeignet sind, die skizzierten strukturellen Beschränkungen zu überwinden, darf bezweifelt werden.

25 Vgl. Amas, Neyla u. a., Transatlantic Homeland Defense, Center for Technology and National Security Policy – National Defense University (Mai 2006), Special Report (<www.ndu.edu/inss/press/CTNSP-INSS/spl-rpt.pdf>); sowie Hamilton, Daniel S., NATO Summit I: In Area, or in Trouble, in: *International Herald Tribune*, 27.11.2006. Am stärksten wird diese Position von dem ehemaligen spanischen Ministerpräsidenten Aznar vertreten. Vgl. Aznar, Jose-Maria, NATO – An Alliance for Freedom, in: *The RUSI Journal*, 151 (2006) 4, S. 38-40.

Right or wrong: Debate in Russia on Conflict in Georgia

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Abstract: The article presents a comprehensive overview of opinions in Russia on the August 2008 military conflict with Georgia. The positions presented include not only those of the political elite and political opinion-makers but also those of the cultural and social elite and of representatives of various ethnic groups involved in the conflict. The overview concludes by presenting results of public opinion polls. The period covered is between the commencement of hostilities on 8 August 2008 and the end of that year. The article is limited to Russia and does not cover the debates of neighbouring countries.

Keywords: Russia, Georgia, conflict, opinion
Russland, Georgien, Konflikt, Meinung

1. Introduction

From the start of the conflict between Georgia and Russia the leading Western news agencies dedicated several reports daily to this conflict. The desire to understand the events was overwhelming. Experts on Russia and the Caucasus were in high demand by local and national news agencies. Initial assessments rapidly found their way into major European and American news channels and newspapers. The majority of the media blamed Russia for the developments and were looking for details.

What was happening in Russia? How were these events shown, interpreted, received and discussed within Russia, by Russians, Georgians, Ossetians and others? From the outset of the conflict, an increasingly intense and comprehensive debate took place on TV, radio and in print media. The mass media provided a platform to numerous persons of various political inclinations as well as apolitical individuals, intellectuals, academics and artist.

This article presents a comprehensive overview of the opinions in Russia on the August 2008 military conflict between Georgia and Russia. The premise is that analysing opinions of a variety of people would help to create a picture of these events from a Russian point of view. Telling this story, I speak with the voices of the people allowing myself to use summaries of their argu-

ments. I conclude the overview by presenting the results of public opinion polls.

The opinions of the two highest ranking leaders of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin are presented to delineate the official position of the political elite. The opinion of the official opposition (parties, other than the ruling one, represented in the parliament) is presented through the voices of Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and Sergei Mironov, a leader of the party “A Just Russia”¹. The position of other parties (unofficial opposition) is presented through the voices of Mikhail Kasyanov, leader of People’s Democratic Union (PDU), Sergei Mitrokhin, a leader of the “Yabloko” party and Garry Kasparov, a leader of “United Civic Front”.

The views of Natalia Narochnitskaya, from the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, Stanislav Belkovskii, Director of the Institute for National Strategy and Alexandr Konovalov, President of the Institute of Strategic Evaluation are presented to delineate the position of Russian political scientists and analysts. The views of Russian intellectuals are presented by the journalist Vladimir Pozner and the writer Boris Strugatskii. In

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1 In the current State Duma (October 2008), only these three parties, in addition to the governing party “United Russia”, are represented.

addition, the reactions of a group of intellectuals from St. Petersburg and of the Imperial House of Russia are presented. The Georgian elite is represented by the TV star Tina Kandelaki, the journalist Otar Kushanashvili, the singer Vakhtang Kikabidze, Nikolai Tsiskaridze, a principal dancer of the Bolshoi Ballet, and a number of others. The position of the Ossetian elite is represented by opera director Valery Gergiev and the actors Bulat Budaev and Soslan Fidarov. To conclude, the opinion of the general public is summarised, based on results of the two prominent opinion polls in Russia: the public opinion research centre VCIOM and the non-governmental organization “Levada Analytical Centre” (“Levada-Center”).

This article is different from other articles on similar topics in presenting not only the position of the political elite and political opinion-makers, but also that of members of the cultural and social elite as well as representatives of various ethnic groups involved in the conflict. These views are then contrasted with results of the public opinion polls. The article is limited to the period between the 8 of August 2008 and the end of December 2008, when research for the article was finalised. It is confined to Russia and does not include debates of neighbouring countries.

2. Political elite

2.1 Official position

The official position of Russia has been framed and expressed by Medvedev and Putin in political addresses, speeches and interviews (Medvedev, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d, 2008e, 2008f, 2008g, 2008h), (Putin, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d). It has been broadcasted on national TV and published in national newspapers. Hence, the official position is that Georgia attacked not only the small territory of South Ossetia, but also the lightly armed peacekeepers, causing deaths mainly among *Russian* peacekeepers². This fact served as additional evidence for the official position that Georgia planned in advance and prepared an attack on South Ossetia and was, potentially, planning a similar one on Abkhazia. As a response, Russia was forced to intervene with the goal of preventing a humanitarian crisis and a new genocide. It was argued that this decision was deeply rooted in the long term historical ties existing between Russia and the people of South Ossetia and the geographical proximity of Russia to South Ossetia, making Russia the only possible state able to intervene in a timely fashion. Thus, Russia had no choice but to intervene promptly to protect the civilian population; in this respect a parallel has been drawn to the massacres in Srebrenica in July 1995, when Dutch peacekeepers preferred to retreat rather than intervene, which literally led to the deadly consequences (Putin, 2008c).

It has been further argued that Russia was against any new form of confrontation and wished to avoid any new edition of the “Cold War” and global isolation of Russia. Russia expected to

find understanding in the West (Medvedev, 2008h), (Putin, 2008b).

As far as the economic consequences are concerned, Russia is aware that the West can try to use leverage against Russia in the economic sphere, in particular with respect to its attempts to become a WTO member. However, it was stressed again and again that when a decision had to be taken to intervene and protect the people of South Ossetia economic considerations were of secondary importance (Medvedev, 2008g), (Putin, 2008a).

Regarding the recognition of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and related accusations of Russia applying double standards in the case of South Ossetia versus the case of Chechnya, Medvedev and Putin, drew a parallel between South Ossetia and Kosovo rather than between South Ossetia and Chechnya. The argument is that as much as Kosovo was a *casus sui generis*, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were also such cases (Medvedev, 2008d), (Putin, 2008c). Moreover this recognition was the implementation of the UN principle of the right of self-determination of nations³.

The Georgian attack is believed by Russian officials to have been staged by Americans and with Americans; their physical presence in the midst of military action has been suspected and is being investigated. In the words of Medvedev, the Americans must be feeling sad that their “virtual project ‘Free Georgia’ had failed” (Medvedev, 2008h). A possible link between the electoral campaign in the USA and the need to support one of the presidential candidates was also mentioned (Putin, 2008c).

2.2 Official opposition

The position of the official opposition is presented through the party positions of the only three opposition parties in the current State Duma: the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and “A Just Russia” Party.

The position of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) was in line with the official position. Its leader Gennady Zyuganov argued that Europe should have been grateful to Russia for stopping a big Caucasian war. There was no doubt, he continued, that Georgia initiated military actions by assaulting and killing the Russian peacekeepers (Zyuganov, 2008b). It was Russia’s military duty to get involved in the conflict (Zyuganov, 2008a). The KPRF organised a protest meeting in front of the Georgian Embassy, waving banners with slogans such as: “Freedom to South Ossetia”, “Saakashvili – to the Hague”, etc. (Vladov, 2008). Moreover, the KPRF authored an appeal to the Russian government asking them to stop the colonial regime of Saakashvili and to immediately recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Zyuganov, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c).

2 Arguably, Georgian peacekeepers were informed about the imminent attacks and left their positions beforehand (“Peace enforcement: war chronicle,” 2008).

3 One might recall, however, that in the case of Serbia-Kosovo, Russia was supporting Serbia’s position arguing for the precedence of territorial integrity over the right of self determination. The change of the position is explained in the interview of Putin to the German channel ARD (Putin, 2008c).

The position of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) was also in line with the official position, but was more radical and far-reaching in its interpretations and suggestions (Zhirinovskiy, 2008b). Thus, the party's leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, argued that a pre-emptive attack of Russia would have been a much better scenario (Zhirinovskiy, 2008c). He stated that in such a case, Tskhinvali and the lives of thousands of Ossetians would have been saved. The recognition of South Ossetia was justified: never again would Ossetians be living together with Georgians (Zhirinovskiy, 2008a).

The party "A Just Russia" was equally united in its opinion and supportive of official Russia's position. In the opinion of its leader, Sergei Mironov, Russia had no other choice but to intervene since Georgia was systematically physically eliminating the local Ossetian and Abkhazian population. He described the actions of Saakashvili as "a strategic mistake", further adding that "He showed the world his intentions towards his people. He is killing them" (Mironov, 2008a). Mironov believes that with his actions "Saakashvili has signed a death sentence for himself" politically (Mironov, 2008b). The party views the worsening of the relations between Russia and the EU as temporary and foresees no serious economic consequences for Russia (Ponomarev, 2008).

2.3 Non-official opposition

By contrast to the official positions, the former prime minister of Russia, and currently a leader of the opposition party, The People's Democratic Union (PDU), Mikhail Kasyanov said that Russia had continuously and incessantly provoked Georgia. It was regrettable that Georgia attacked militarily; however, Russia should have stayed within its peacekeepers' mandate. Instead it launched a full-scale war. He thoroughly criticised the actions of Russia's government and argued that these actions were unprofessional and disproportionate. By these actions, he continued, Russia turned itself from a peacekeeper and mediator in the region into a party to the conflict, which might lead to international isolation. He was one of the first to suggest that, as a consequence, Russia might be deprived of hosting the Olympic Games in 2014 (Stack, 2008).

The "Yabloko" party expressed concerns about the situation in South Ossetia. Its leader, Sergey Mitrokhin, expressed his wish that Russia should not turn from a "saviour of lives in South Ossetia" into an aggressor and should stop the war as soon as possible (Mitrokhin, 2008b). At the same time, he appealed to the NATO countries to take the issue of Georgia's membership in NATO off its agenda (Mitrokhin, 2008a).

The Russian chess grandmaster, former World Chess Champion and nowadays writer and political activist as well as leader of the political movement "United Civic Front" (UCF), Garry Kasparov, partially echoed the official position. In particular, he did not doubt that it was Saakashvili who had provoked the war (Kasparov, 2008c). However, he maintained that the post-war developments were against the interests of Russia and its citizens, that they contradict the international treaties Russia has signed and ratified and conflict with the norms of international cooperation (Kasparov, 2008a). Moreover, he blamed

Russia for acting against the agreed-upon Sarkozy-Medvedev plan for the peaceful regulation of the conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Kasparov, 2008a). As a consequence, he envisioned a growing instability in the Caucasus and the proliferation of separatist movements, the complete political isolation of Russia, the acceleration of negative tendencies in the Russian economy and the weakening of its international position. By recognising South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia has prepared a long-term "headache" for itself (Kasparov, 2008b). In short, he viewed this conflict and Russia's response as a military political adventure with catastrophic political consequences.

3. Social and cultural elite

A variety of divergent opinions of Russia's intellectuals, including those of ethnic Georgians and Ossetians are presented below.

3.1 Political analysts

Natalia Narochnitskaya, head of the Paris office of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, a Russian non-profit foundation, defined the operation in South Ossetia as Russia's victory. For the first time in the last 15 years Russia acted as suggested by its "national pride, historical obligations and own interests" (Ovchinnikov, 2008). Russia demonstrated that the opinion of its own people was more important than the opinion of the West. According to her, the whole Western rhetoric about the Georgia-Ossetian conflict was actually not because of Georgia, but because of the new rising power and will of Russia. She was sure that if Georgia had been located somewhere else geographically, for example in Siberia, no one would have cared about it. She argued that the "anti-Russian policy of Georgia is necessary for the West" (Ovchinnikov, 2008). Georgia was supposed to serve the purposes of "squeezing Russia out" as a main military player in the Black Sea area (Ovchinnikov, 2008).

Stanislav Belkovskii, director of the Institute for National Strategy, argued that Saakashvili had achieved two of his three goals. First, the total destruction of the infrastructure of South Ossetia and its capital, Tskhinvali, was achieved as well as "cleansing" the territory of Ossetians by making them flee. Second, Russia was deprived of the exclusive status of a peacekeeper in the region, which was his long-term goal. He failed only in his third goal, which was to take full control of the territory of South Ossetia. Belkovskii further argued that accepting the Sarkozy-Medvedev plan would mean a full defeat for Russia. Recognising South Ossetia and Abkhazia was the only winning strategy which would allow Russia to legitimise its economic and military presence in the region. What seemed probable in the immediate aftermath of the crisis – depriving Russia of the right to hold the Olympic Games in Sochi – is no longer relevant. The reasoning is that the Olympic Games are at first instance a commercial project and involve many partners, including foreign ones.

Alexandr Konovalov, president of the Institute of Strategic Evaluation, considered that the events might have sped up the accession of Georgia into NATO, but without the two regions

of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Mekhtiev, 2008). He doubted that a change of leadership in Georgia was one of Russia's aims in this conflict and argued that in Georgia "there is no strong political leader who is also pro-Russian" (Mekhtiev, 2008). Moreover, the conflict influenced the whole of Georgian anti-Russian sentiments. The main outcome for Russia, according to him, is that the USA and Western Europe understood that they "should take into account the position of Russia, in particular in matters related to the Caucasus" (Mekhtiev, 2008). He also said that Russia stopped at the right moment, not crossing the line after which a new "Cold War" would have been unavoidable (Mekhtiev, 2008).

3.2 Russian intellectuals

Vladimir Posner, a Russian journalist⁴ and president of the Russian Academy of TV (until October 2008), might be known to a Western reader from the first talk shows and TV bridges between the Soviet Union and USA, which he initiated in the 1980s. He was the one who suggested in 2007 TV-bridges between Russia and Georgia to talk about the conflict among all parties and look together for ways to solve it. According to him, "every person who sees a bit further than his own nose should have understood that after the recognition of Kosovo, Russia would, inevitably – with 98 per cent probability – recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia" (Posner, 2008). According to Posner, Putin, at that time still president, was talking about it very clearly. To a Russian, the situation in Kosovo is not different from the one in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was clear that if Georgia would not change its policy and attitude toward these entities (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), then this would be an outcome. He continued by arguing that it is difficult now to imagine that South Ossetia and Abkhazia would ever again wish to become a part of Georgia. The Georgians have humiliated and mistreated Abkhazians since Soviet times. This attitude was exacerbated during the rule of former Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia and has continued during the rule of Saakashvili. Although not easy, recognition of these entities was the right thing to do from the point of view of Russian state interest (Posner, 2008).

With respect to consequences for Russia, these events indeed placed Russia in a position of international isolation. There is, however, mutual interdependence between Russia and the West, thus Posner believed that Russia would not be excluded from the "G8", no new war was imminent and no return to the Iron Curtain was possible. However, the image of Russia was certainly damaged. Posner suspected American involvement as well; he made particular reference to partisan coverage of the crisis on American TV by which he felt deeply disgusted (Posner, 2008).

A famous Soviet and Russian science fiction writer, Boris Strugatskii mentioned philosophically that he "cannot think of any politician, any political power which is not guilty either through its action or through its inaction" (Strugatskii, 2008). This might have created the impression that he approved of the

actions taken by Russia. However, he continued by describing Russia as a totalitarian regime which thrives on short victorious wars. He further stated that the Caucasus has been balancing between peace and war since the collapse of the USSR. One of the reasons is that Russia and Russian elites will never agree to let Georgia out of its sphere of interest. In the dilemma between the "right to self determination" and "territorial integrity", "power" wins. And only in those cases where "power" is not interested, can the UN be useful somehow (Strugatskii, 2008).

Strugatskii compared South Ossetia to Chechnya, and argued that Georgia did not do in South Ossetia anything Russia had not done in Chechnya, even using the same justification of "bringing constitutional order to separatist regions" (Vishnevskiy, 2008a). He further blamed Russia for a lack of consistency in its positions. He argued Russia had negatively assessed the actions of the USA in Serbia against the Milosevic regime, but then, in his view, took similar actions in Georgia (Vishnevskiy, 2008a).

A group of intellectuals from St. Petersburg, including poets, writers, artists, professors, political scientists, and sociologists, wrote an open letter to their colleagues in Georgia. This letter addressed to the Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature in Tbilisi was in essence dedicated to all Georgian intellectuals. The letter containing the words "this is not our war and [these are] not our tanks" (Vishnevskiy, 2008b) and stated that the politicians of two or maybe three states put cultural and human relations between Russia and Georgia at risk. It also recalled that WWII influenced the attitude of Russians towards the Germans. Thus, the authors of the letter were concerned about preventing a similar change in attitude between Russians and Georgians. The answer from the Georgian side, little expected from the Russian side mainly because of the broken lines of communications, arrived promptly. The letter was full of gratitude for a public expression of opinion and hope that the links between intellectuals would remain untouched and unchanged (Petlyanova, 2008). This was one of the first signs that human relations might be above the politics.

The Imperial House of Russia echoed the official position of Russian government. The Head of the House of Romanoff, H.I.H. Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna is convinced that "the present conflict in South Ossetia has its origins abroad." She expressed her profound anguish and "is troubled by the actions of political leaders, who are only fulfilling the will of foreign masters and, because of this, have turned the territory of their own country into a bombing range for foreign weapons, and who have sacrificed their own people for foreign interests" (Imperial House of Russia, 2008).

3.3 Famous Georgians who made a career in the USSR or in Russia

This section features various famous persons of Georgian origin (not necessarily with Georgian citizenship) who are or were active in Russian intellectual or cultural life. Thus, Tina Kandelaki, TV star and one of the top television presenters, nicknamed in the Russian press the "Main Georgian of Moscow" (Antonova, 2008), argued in her blog that the Georgian people

4 He had his own political TV-show "Vremena" which, once a week, on Sunday evening, replaced the official evening news.

were against the Saakashvili regime and were against the war (Kandelaki, 2008). She described Saakashvili as a person with weak nerves but high ambitions and narcissism who compares himself to David the Builder. She argued, “Saakashvili is bound to go down into history of Georgia as Mikheil the Destroyer” (Walker, 2008). She also suspected American involvement in this conflict and suggested that the main interest of Americans in Georgia were not people but strategy: “We are only 40 minutes away from Iran” (Walker, 2008). She blamed Saakashvili, however, she believed that Russian-Georgian relations would shortly resume on a normal path again since their cultures have been intertwined for centuries.

Nikolai Svanidze, a famous TV journalist, working at the pro-government channel “Russia”, author of Medvedev’s biography and creator of the “Historical Chronicles” was one of the most outspoken persons during the days of conflict and immediately afterwards (Svanidze, 2008). He argued that Russia would have scored higher politically if it had not crossed the border between South Ossetia into Georgia. Additionally, he saw the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the aftermath of the military actions as inevitable (Svanidze, 2008). He further argued that these events showed that Russia is not surrounded by a circle of friends (referring to the nearby states), and there are few friends further away (referring to the rest of the world). He is concerned with an intensification of Russia’s isolation. In consequence, he sees that it would be a difficult task to increase Russia’s influence on the international scene (Svanidze, 2008).

Otar Kushanashvili, a charismatic journalist and TV presenter, openly named Saakashvili a “recruitee” of the USA and believed that he should be judged by an international criminal tribunal for these events (Russia.Ru, 2008). He further argued that no single life is worth to be lost to enhance the self-esteem of a politician and called for politicians on both sides to overcome their ambitions and start negotiations immediately (Baranets, 2008). Kushanashvili stated that Georgia had no basis for its sovereignty. In his opinion, the only real partner of Georgia is Russia. Thus, Georgia should search for ways to restore its friendship with Russia as soon as possible. As for Saakashvili, the only good move he could still make for Georgia was to voluntarily give up his post and ask the Georgians for forgiveness (Russia.Ru, 2008).

Vakhtang Kikabidze, a Georgian and Soviet singer, screenwriter, producer, composer and actor who had played in an iconic Soviet movie “*Mimino*”, was truly exceptional in his scale of criticism of Russia. He accused Russia of staging a long-planned military and political attack and then occupying Georgia, assessing it as act against Saakashvili and his rule. As a sign of protest against Russian aggression in Georgia he cancelled a scheduled concert in September in St. Petersburg and refused an Order of Honour decoration, offered by the President of Russia, to honour his 70th birthday (Pleshakova, 2008). The translation of his critical interview in the Georgian newspaper “*Kvela Siakhle*” was widely discussed in Russian mass media. His words concerning the actions Georgia should take against Russia were initially translated from Georgian into Russian, as Georgia “should bring this country [Russia] to an end” or “should put an end to this country [Russia]” (Vorsobin, 2008).

After a wave of disapproval in the Russian mass media of a variety of persuasions and public calls to ban him indefinitely from entering Russia, he offered his interpretation of his words with the new version sounding like Georgia “should distance itself from Russia” (Sapozhnikova, 2008). He gave further assurances that Georgians are still treating Russians as brothers. Russia is good, its policy is bad would seem a perfect short version of his opinion.

Another stand was taken by the principal dancer of the Bolshoi theatre, Nikolai Tsiskaridze, who is Russia’s People’s artist⁵. He was born in Tbilisi and holds Georgian and Russian artistic titles. He mentioned that while he is, indeed, of Georgian origin, he did not feel any different from those who were bombed and killed in South Ossetia. He continued by suggesting that artists should stay out of politics, and he as artist and Russian artist of Georgian origin would like to do so. For the same reason he disapproved the position and involvement of Kikabidze (Tsiskaridze, 2008).

The Russian actor and citizen with a Georgian family name, Oleg Basilashvili, born in 1942, is personally attached to Georgia, including South Ossetia, because this is the place where he spent the early years of his life during the WWII evacuation. He abstained from giving his opinion on the events because he doubted the objectivity of the coverage by Russian media. Nevertheless, he pointed to two issues. First, that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are *de iure* Georgian territory. Until the international community accepts South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states they should be considered as a part of Georgia. Thus, he continued, “the entrance of our [Russia’s] military is an occupation” (Basilashvili, 2008). Second, he disapproved of Russia’s policy of giving Russian citizenship to the applicants from South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Basilashvili, 2008).

Boris Akunin (a pen name of Grigory Chkhartishvili), a philologist, critic, essayist born in Georgia, was named Russian Writer of the Year in 2000. He defines Russia as not (yet) being a democratic country and strongly disapproves of Putin’s authoritarianism. He argued that, for most Europeans, the Russian invasion into Georgia beyond the borders of South Ossetia immediately revived the memory of the events in Budapest and Prague several decades ago and this might explain the negative reaction of a number of European countries. With respect to the interstate developments between Russia and Georgia, he believed that relations between Russia and Georgia might only get worse unless the leadership in one country or the other were to change. Further, he believed that in the aftermath of the conflict the efforts of intellectuals alone would not suffice to restore and maintain good relations between Russians and Georgians. This is a moment, he argued, for the political elites to assess once again the actions of Russia and to open a public discussion of the political steps taken by both countries. As far as the consequences are concerned, he saw that Russia found itself isolated, was risking being expelled from the G-8, endangered the Sochi Olympic games and dashed hopes of becoming a member of WTO in the near future. Thus, it was “a small mili-

5 The People’s Artist of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics / Russia, also sometimes translated as National Artist of the USSR, is an honorary title granted to citizens of the Soviet Union / Russian Federation.

tary victory followed by a big political defeat” (Akunin, 2008). Even if it were a part of the big American plan, Russia’s intervention did not alter it significantly (Akunin, 2008).

Soso Pavliashvili, a famous pop singer, said in interviews that he felt equally hurt by the sufferings of Georgians and Ossetians in this senseless war. He views Ossetians as ethnically the closest to the Georgian nation. He has advocated for Russia to remain an important player in the Caucasus. He advised his son to study at the Russian military school in Russia and not at the American one in Georgia. He believed that Georgia was not a place for the American military. “If Russia flourishes, Georgia will flourish”, he concluded (Veligzhanina, 2008).

Among the opinions and reactions of yet other famous Georgians are that of Georgi Danelia, a Georgian film director, who condemned the military actions and regretted that he had lived to see a day of war between Georgia and Russia⁶ (Veligzhanina, 2008). Tamara Gverdtseteli, a variety singer and People’s artist of Georgia born in Tbilisi, found these events shocking and could not understand how such horror could happen. Stanislav Sadalskii, an actor and citizen of Georgia, argued that he is “sure that in this case it is not Georgia but America fighting against Russia” (Baranets, 2008). The cancelled performance by Nani Bregvadze, a Georgian People’s artist and famous singer of Russian romances, can be interpreted as a protest against Russia. She postponed her jubilee concert, which was to be performed at the Academic Cappella in St. Petersburg on 26 September 2008 (Bezmenova, 2008). The views of some other famous Georgians were difficult to understand and interpret, as for example the opinion of the President of the Russian Academy of Arts, Zurab Tsereteli, a controversial Russian-Georgian painter, sculptor and architect⁷. Commenting on these events he said: “Sometimes you need to take a break from love, and that’s what’s happening now. But tomorrow the romance will start again, and it will be passionate!” (Walker, 2008) Some refused to comment on the situation, for example, the director of a singer Valerii Meladze said that the artists would feel hurt to see his name next to any mention of war (Guru Ken Show, 2008).

3.4 Famous Ossetians who made a career in the USSR or in Russia

Only a few famous Ossetians could be identified, which is no doubt yet more evidence of how small the Ossetian nation is. A world famous opera director, Valery Gergiev, Ossetian by nationality was full of grief, commenting on the events stressing that for such a small nation as Ossetian to lose 1,5-2 thousand people was a big loss⁸ (Beroeva, 2008). The “world most famous Ossetian”, as named by the Russian press (Rozhaeva, 2008), deeply regretted the almost complete destruction of Tskhinvali, comparing the ruins of this city to the ruins of Stalingrad

destroyed during WWII (Kireeva, 2008). He strongly believed that it was a campaign carefully planned in advance and organised by Saakashvili. He promised to carry the message about the initiators of this tragedy on every possible occasion to Europe, the USA or elsewhere. In an interview with the BBC Russian Service, he expressed the gratitude to the Russian army crediting their timely action and support with saving the lives of another 2-3 thousand Ossetians (Beroeva, 2008). Gergiev gave a concert on the ruins of Tskhinvali. He was accompanied by two other famous artists, Dmitri Hvorostovsky and Anna Netrebko (Rozhaeva, 2008).

An actor, Bulat Budaev, believed that this was not a war between people, but rather a war provoked by Saakashvili: “I do not know why he is so indebted to the USA” (Veligzhanina, 2008). Another actor, Soslan Fidarov, mentioned in grief that this war took away from him his best friend who died in Tskhinvali. These are his people, he continued, and thus he was suffering with them. The irony of the life, as he put it, was that in his last movie about WWII he, an Ossetian, played a heroic Georgian, while in real life a Georgian took away the life of his best friend (Veligzhanina, 2008).

4. Opinion polls

In this section I present the results of opinion polls carried out by two of the most prominent institutions in Russia. The polls included here were conducted in the period from August to October 2008 by the governmental public opinion research centre VCIOM and the non-governmental organization “Levada Analytical Center” (“Levada-Center”).

4.1 Public Opinion Research Center – VCIOM

In the public opinion polls conducted by VCIOM (WCIOM, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d), the majority of Russians approved of the policy of the Russian government and fully supported Russia’s recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. More than 70 per cent of the respondents believed that this conflict touched directly on the interests of Russia; more than 80 per cent of the respondents defined it as a full scale military conflict or war. Three out of four respondents (75%) blamed Georgia and the USA for the conflict. Russia’s involvement in the conflict was supported by more than 80 per cent of respondents; more than 70 per cent believed that Russia should keep its peacekeepers in South Ossetia. Those opposing the presence of Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia argued against new casualties among the Russian population and believed that Georgians and Ossetians should resolve the situation by themselves. Those who supported the continuation of Russia’s military presence in the area argued that this was a way to keep peace, protect the South Ossetian civilian population and prevent further attacks, chaos and genocide. Russians believed that only Russia would be able to protect the civilian population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (WCIOM, 2008b). Every second inhabitant of Russia became less friendly to Georgians believing that there were more divisive than common features between these two nations (51%) (WCIOM,

6 Georgi Danelia originated a series of “sad comedies” as he styles them.

7 He might be known to a Western reader as the creator of the sculpture “Tear of Grief” officially donated by the Russian government as a memorial to those that died in the September 11th terrorist attacks.

8 Valery Gergiev is a general director and artistic director of the Mariinsky Theatre, principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra and the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra and principal guest conductor of the Metropolitan Opera.

2008d). As regards the future of Russia's relations with Western countries, Russians are against "cold relations and a hot war" with the West (WCIOM, 2008c). Although expecting a pull-back in the relations with Western countries in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, Russians saw it as a temporary phenomenon. Every third respondent saw Germany, the UK, Japan and the USA as partners of Russia and considered Russia a European country (WCIOM, 2008a).

4.2 "Levada Analytical Center"

Public opinion surveys carried out by the "Levada-Center" clearly showed that an ever-increasing share of respondents (70%-87%) considered that Russia's leadership did everything possible to avoid an escalation of the conflict and bloodshed (Levada-Center, 2008a, 2008c, 2008e). As seen by the Russian population, the top three reasons for Russia's military intervention were maintaining peace, protecting the Ossetian population and defending Russian peacekeepers. The majority of Russians took the side of South Ossetia in this conflict and was in favour of governmental humanitarian assistance to this region (81 % of respondents). With respect to military assistance, half of the respondents were in favour while more than one third was clearly against (Levada-Center, 2008b).

Notwithstanding this, the overwhelming majority of the population (80%) justified the recognition by Russia of South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence. Concerning the future status of South Ossetia, 34% were in favour of the independence of South Ossetia from Georgia and 46% for a unification of South Ossetia with Russia (Levada-Center, 2008c). Equal numbers of respondents saw it as a timely act (34%) or overdue (30%), only 12% as a premature act or as wrong (12%) (Levada-Center, 2008d). Among those who disapproved of the act of recognition, 70 per cent believed that it would increase tensions in the Caucasus, speed up the separatist movements inside Russia and possibly lead to conflict with third countries. Furthermore, the majority of Russians believed that Russia should keep its peacekeepers in the region, encourage the return of Georgian refugees into South Ossetia and Abkhazia, protect them, and finance the rebuilding of the urban and rural areas in South Ossetia (Levada-Center, 2008b).

While the overwhelming majority of Russians (74%) believe that the Georgian people have fallen hostage to the geopolitical ambitions of the USA, they disagree (52%) that the Ossetian people have fallen victim to the conflicting ambitions of Russia and Georgia (Levada-Center, 2008c).

The roots of the conflict were seen in the US policy of expanding its influence on Russia's neighbouring countries (49%) and in the discriminatory policy towards Ossetians and Abkhazians by the Georgian government (32%). It was also seen in Saakashvili opting for military action to resolve the territorial conflict in order to facilitate the path towards NATO membership and strengthen his own position so he could remain the country's president (81%) (Levada-Center, 2008a).

Russians also believe that Western countries were supporting Georgia in this conflict because they aim at weakening Russia

and decreasing its role in the Caucasus to the minimum (66%). Nevertheless, almost the same number of respondents (60%) argued in favour of an international resolution of the conflict with the participation of the UN and EU (Levada-Center, 2008e).

There was some uncertainty concerning future relations of Russia with Western countries. Restoring the status quo in relations was expected by 48%, while another 35% believed in a "new edition" of the Cold War and yet other 18% being in doubt. Every fifth Russian feared Russia's isolation, every fifth believed in the possibility of a third World War. The majority, however, were of the opinion that the tension would ease in the near future (Levada-Center, 2008d).

Every fifth person believed that the USA was the winner in this conflict and almost every third person believed that Russia was the winner. One fourth saw no winners at all (Levada-Center, 2008d).

As the results of these polls demonstrate, Russians have overwhelmingly supported the course of action taken by their government, including the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They have also been concerned about the potential consequences of the crisis for Russia. Russians strongly believe in a third party involvement in the conflict. The majority approved of the continuation of Russia's involvement in the Caucasus region.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this article was to present the debate that took place in Russia in the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian military conflict in August 2008. The article comprises diverse opinions of people ranging from official politicians to political analysts to the public responding to opinion polls.

Those who approved the course of the Russian government were united on several issues. They believed that Georgia was the initiator of military action and justified Russia's military intervention to save the lives of South Ossetians. They also justified the intervention of the Russian army beyond the borders of South Ossetia on military tactical grounds. They further approved of the recognition by Russia of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the aftermath of these events, arguing that never again would Ossetians and Abkhazians be willing to live together with Georgians in the same state. Moreover, they approved of Russia acting similarly to the way the international community (in particular, the USA and EU) acted in Kosovo. They suspected the involvement of the USA and they agreed that this conflict has damaged the image of Russia abroad.

Those who disapproved of Russia's actions did so based on one or more points. Some suggested that Georgia responded to constant military provocations from the side of Russia. Others accused Russia of double standards comparing this conflict to the situation in Chechnya, or in imitating the USA, comparing this conflict to the situation in Kosovo. Still others blamed Russia for becoming a party to the conflict long ago, in particular by awarding Russian citizenship to the South Ossetians and Abkhazians. Yet others were concerned with the negative

consequences for Russia in the aftermath of the events: the instability of Russia's borders, political and economical isolation, damaged image, etc.

In this analysis those who approved of the actions taken by Russia outnumbered those who disapproved of these actions. In both camps, there were people of Russian and Georgian origins. No Ossetian or Abkhazian was identified who condemned the actions taken by Russia in South Ossetia. Those who approved mainly focused on the steps taken immediately after the start of the military campaign: intervention in South Ossetia and beyond its borders, recognition of the statehood of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Those who disapproved based their arguments on the potential future negative consequences for Russia: yet more casualties among Russians, Russia's international image, political isolation and economic consequences.

It is possible – even probable – that not all the variations of the opinions of diverse actors were presented and certainly not all those actors directly or indirectly involved were given a voice in this article. I believe, nevertheless, that mainstream opinions of various persuasions were presented here and might serve as a point of reference for an informed and interested reader.

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