

Georgia's fine, lofty, useless strategy

Georgia's new plans to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia ignore a fundamental problem: their people aren't interested



[George Hewitt](#)
[guardian.co.uk](#), Wednesday 24 February 2010 16.09 GMT

The [Soviet constitution introduced in 1936](#) by Iosep Dzhugashvili, the Georgian better known to the world as Stalin, has been described as one of the most exemplary documents of its kind. The fact that it was the same year that Stalin unleashed the Great Terror on his own citizens demonstrates the dangerous gap between theory and reality. It is a gap again clear from the government of Georgia's recently published [state strategy on occupied territories](#). Like Stalin's constitution it may win approval from foreign supporters, but on the ground in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is a total irrelevance.

For all the document's fine words and lofty sentiments, the fundamental problem is ignored: the Abkhazians and South Ossetians have not the slightest wish to be "reintegrated" into a unitary Georgian state. Georgian president Mikheil Saak'ashvili can discuss this strategy in the west, as he did on his visit to London last week, but nobody in Abkhazia or South Ossetia is interested in joining in these discussions. Their priorities are direct contacts with the west along with the freedom to travel outside their republics on their own passports. If the west refuses to meet these requests, the result will not be a weakening of resolve but even closer links with Moscow.

Even a quick reading of Georgia's new strategy document reveals its flaws. Paragraph four asserts that Georgia "rejects the pursuit of a military solution". If this is so, it is strange that the Saak'ashvili government doggedly refuses to sign a non-aggression pact with the Abkhazians and South Ossetians. Even after [the August 2008 war](#) – sparked by Saak'ashvili's assault on Tskhinvali – the Georgian delegation to the Geneva peace-talks says it will only sign such an accord with Russia, not with Abkhazia or South Ossetia. But it is precisely because of repeated Georgian attacks over many years that the Abkhazians and South Ossetians have no trust in Tbilisi, striving to rebuild its military capability, and insist on determining their own destiny.

Nor will the Abkhazians put much trust in the assurance on page two of the strategy of the intent to support "the preservation of cultural heritage and identity". It is etched into their collective memory how Georgian forces in 1992 burnt to the ground their research institute with its priceless library and state archives. Fire-fighters were kept away at gunpoint in order to destroy much of Abkhazia's cultural heritage and erase documentary evidence of Abkhazian presence on their land.

When [Eduard Shevardnadze](#) returned to his homeland in March 1992, Georgia was in chaos, with war raging in South Ossetia, a violent insurgency in Mingrelia in support of his ousted predecessor, and tensions building next-door in Abkhazia. It was at this moment that the west, with John Major's Conservative government in the lead, made a crucial miscalculation. Already struggling with the break up of Yugoslavia, they decided to ignore the rights of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians to self-determination and instead champion Georgia's territorial integrity, granting it membership of the IMF, World Bank and United Nations.

Georgia celebrated by attacking Abkhazia a fortnight later, sparking a 14-month war, which it lost but which cost the victorious Abkhazians 4% of their population. Since then, all they have been offered by Tbilisi is essentially a return to the *status quo ante bellum*. It is hardly surprising that they have rejected such a deal.

For much of the post-war period Moscow's stance was decidedly unsympathetic to the Abkhazians. Shevardnadze's former Politburo colleague Boris Yeltsin was Russian president, and his protege, Andrey Kozyrev, was foreign minister. But Abkhazian determination not to yield and the election of Vladimir Putin as Yeltsin's successor brought about a change.

The "no war, no peace" status of the disputed territories had to be resolved, and Saak'ashvili's move against South Ossetia provided the opportunity. The Georgian military was ejected from both South Ossetia and Abkhazia's K'odor Valley. President Dmitry Medvedev then promptly corrected Russia's mistake in recognising Georgia's Soviet frontiers – a move made solely to try to limit the secession movements within Russia itself.

Georgia should accept the tide of history and abandon its fantasy re-integration strategy. It is no good, for example, branding the government of Abkhazia as a puppet regime when Sergei Bagapsh has twice won the presidency in democratic elections.

There is a role, too, for Georgia's western friends. They need to persuade Tbilisi to face reality and recognise the lost territories. This would then allow the international community to follow suit. It would finally pave the way for meaningful talks on how to establish viable stability across Transcaucasia – something which must be in everyone's interest.

The Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/feb/24/georgia-strategy-abkhazia-theory>