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Tbilisi looks like winning the peace

By Quentin Peel

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One year ago this week, war broke out between Russia and [Georgia](#). Many international leaders, including Vladimir Putin, Russia's former president and now prime minister, and George W. Bush, former US president, were in Beijing for the opening of the Olympic Games. The hostilities seemed to take them all by surprise.

Georgia's hot-headed president, Mikheil Saakashvili, was widely blamed for ordering the first big assault, with an artillery barrage on Tskhinvali, capital of the secessionist province of South Ossetia, on the night of August 7.

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The precise order of events is still disputed. Georgia claims its troops were responding to shelling of Georgian villages. But it is clear that within hours Russian tanks and armoured vehicles had crossed Georgia's borders in overwhelming force, and swiftly crushed any Georgian resistance.

Yet what appeared to come as a surprise to Georgia's friends in the US and in the European Union should have been glaringly obvious. Russia had been building up its military forces inside Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and over the border in the north Caucasus, for months. More than two years before, Moscow had imposed a total trade embargo on Georgia, and cut all transport links to the former Soviet republic, after Tbilisi had arrested suspected Russian spies.

According to Andrei Illarionov, chief economic adviser to Mr Putin when he was president, the decisions that made war inevitable between Russia and Georgia were taken much earlier – between September 1999 and June 2003. They pre-dated the Rose Revolution that brought Mr Saakashvili to power in 2004.

It must be said that Mr Illarionov has become a furious critic of the Russian government. He ceased to work for Mr Putin in December 2005 and is now a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington. He is also an economist, not a military analyst.

Nonetheless, in an article in a new publication on the war*, Mr Illarionov has assembled a wealth of detail to prove his case.

He admits that he is not certain if "the Grand Plan to launch a war against Georgia existed from the very beginning, or whether it emerged . . . only after the failure of endless attempts by the Russian leadership to weaken, undermine and destroy the Georgian side through non-military means".

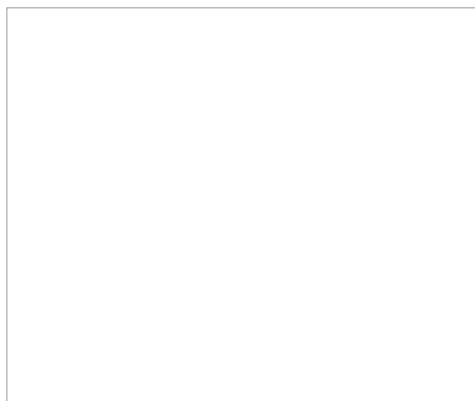
His thesis tallies with the conclusion of other senior Russian officials, speaking off-the-record, that Georgian leaders were asking for trouble.

"They had the chance in the 1990s to be best friends with Moscow, but they chose not to be," according to one top former Kremlin aide. "That drove us into the arms of Abkhazia."

Another describes the attitude of Mr Saakashvili towards Mr Putin, at one of their early meetings. "I have never heard another leader talk to the Russian president with such a lack of respect," he said, with obvious disgust.

In his account of the years and months leading up to the outbreak of open war, Mr Illarionov admits that "the Georgian government . . . was not exclusively passive".

But he blames Moscow for the bulk of "provocation", including events of which he must have had personal experience. In December 2005, for example, the heads of Russian energy companies doing business with Georgia were summoned to the Kremlin and asked "whether it was



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possible to stop the supply of energy across the border". They said No. Days later, mysterious explosions badly damaged two gas pipelines and an electricity line, cutting off power "in the midst of one of the coldest winters of the decade".

The question of who started the war may not matter much in Moscow. Russia has changed the facts on the ground: its troops are in control in the two enclaves, and it has shown that it is still the only power that matters in former Soviet space.

For the benighted people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, however, there has been little improvement in their lives. Tskhinvali is still a bomb site. Russian aid appears to have vanished into a notoriously corrupt bureaucracy. Both territories are dependent on subsidies from Moscow.

Georgia may have seen its pride sorely dented, but the economy has held up much better. American and European aid has flooded in. Tbilisi appears to have lost the war, but it is winning the peace.

**The Guns of August 2008. Russia's War with Georgia, edited by Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, published by M.E. Sharpe, New York and London*

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