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## Russia triumphant as EU's Georgia war report sees light

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Russia has expressed satisfaction with an independent report on its five-day war with former Soviet Republic Georgia in August 2008. The report was commissioned by the EU and published yesterday (30 September).

### Background:

Russia and Georgia fought a five-day war in August 2008. The conflict saw Russian troops repel an assault on the breakaway pro-Russian region of South Ossetia, which broke free from Tbilisi's rule in the early 1990s.

Russia later recognised South Ossetia and Georgia's second breakaway region of Abkhazia as independent states. Russia has thousands of troops stationed in both regions.

Vladimir Putin, Russia's prime minister, was quoted at the time by a French diplomat as essentially saying that he wanted Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili hanged.

Privately, EU representatives generally recognise that Saakashvili was to blame for the August war. However, he still enjoys Western support as a symbol of the 2003 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia.

With economic growth in Georgia slowing dramatically after the war, the EU and other international donors pledged €3.5 billion to rebuild the country and boost its ailing economy, in return for democratic reforms ([EurActiv 23/10/08](#)).

On 29 January, in a rare show of unity, the leaders of around a dozen opposition parties in Georgia issued a joint declaration calling on Saakashvili to quit and hold free and fair elections to the presidency and the parliament ([EurActiv 02/02/09](#)).

On 9 April, massive protests against Saakashvili began, with US analysts warning of a possible "revolution" to topple the Georgian president. The protests lasted a long time but eventually lost steam.

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The report, commissioned by the EU and drafted under the leadership of Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, gives an unequivocal answer to the main question of who started the war, said Vladimir Chizhov, Russia's ambassador to the EU, talking to the Brussels press.

"It says squarely that it was the Georgian massive shelling and artillery attack on the city of Tshinvali [the main city of the Georgian province of South Ossetia], during the night of 7-8 August 2008, which marked the beginning of large-scale hostilities," the diplomat said, displaying visible satisfaction.

### **Report as big as a brick**

Chizhov, who displayed a copy of the brick-sized report and even posed for photos, explained that he had received it just hours beforehand and could not comment in depth, explaining that a reaction from a higher level would come later. But he added that the report was "not a big surprise" and confirmed things that Russia "already knew".

Asked by journalists what he expected to happen next, he expressed hope that those countries who were still unsure of where responsibility for the Georgia war lies would now come up with a "clearer position". He said he also hoped that countries which support Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili would now "think twice", claiming that those seeking to poison the overall improvement of his country's relations with the US and the West in general under US President Barack Obama had suffered a blow.

"I think Mr Saakashvili should have resigned a long time ago," Chizhov said.

Poland has led a number of initiatives in support of Saakashvili since the conflict, in conjunction with the Baltic countries and the Czech Republic. Poland had demanded an investigation into the Georgia war in the hope that it would accuse Russia of aggression.

Asked by EurActiv to name the countries which in his view would be disappointed by the report, Chizhov refused to do so, but said he hoped their number would be limited.

The Russian diplomat dismissed the view that the Russian military incursion into Georgia at the time of the war was a disproportionate response.

"The Russian response was proportional, swift and to the point," he hammered home.

Georgia also expressed satisfaction with the report's findings, emphasising that the Russian invasion had violated international law.

"The allegations of my country have been proven. It was Georgia which came under invasion from another country, in violation of international law," its ambassador to the EU, Salome Samadashvili, quoted by AFP.

### **Provocation 'from both sides'**

Andrei Ilarionov, a Russian researcher working for the US Cato Institute think-tank, also made a presentation in Brussels, pointing to Russia's "provocations", which he said had lured Georgia into a trap. Both sides were setting up traps for each other, he said, before recounting a series of incidents and developments in which Russia had acted as the provocateur every time.

But Ilarionov admitted that it was a "mad" decision for Georgia to start the military attack on the night of 7 August 2008. Asked by EurActiv if he believed that the Georgian leadership was counting on the military support of the West, he was categorical in saying that to the contrary, the West had made no promises and only advised Tbilisi not to fall victim to provocations.

The Russian researcher also disclosed that senior US diplomats did not even report Saakashvili's worried telephone calls preceding the conflict to a higher authority.

Matthew Bryza, US deputy assistant secretary of state, and Daniel Fried, principal deputy special adviser to then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, never reported his concerns, said Ilarionov, adding that he was certain of his sources.

**Positions:**

Reuters has compiled a list of key quotes from the report, as follows:

**OUTBREAK OF CONFLICT:**

"The shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict in Georgia, yet it was only the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, provocations and incidents."

**GEORGIA ASSAULT UNJUSTIFIABLE:**

"There is the question of whether the use of force by Georgia in South Ossetia, beginning with the shelling of Tskhinvali during the night of 7/8 August 2008, was justifiable under international law. It was not."

**RUSSIA'S DEFENCE OF PEACEKEEPERS LEGAL:**

"There seems to be little doubt that if the Russian peacekeepers were attacked, Russia had the right to defend them using military means proportionate to the attack. Hence the Russian use of force for defensive purposes during the first phase of the conflict would be legal."

**RUSSIA WENT BEYOND DEFENCE:**

"Although it should be admitted that it is not easy to decide where the line must be drawn, it seems, however, that much of the Russian military action went far beyond the reasonable limits of defence."

**ALL SIDES BROKE HUMANITARIAN LAW:**

"The Mission established that all sides to the conflict - Georgian forces, Russian forces and South Ossetian forces - committed violations of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law."

**NO GENOCIDE:**

"The Mission concludes that to the best of its knowledge allegations of genocide committed by the Georgian side in the context of the August 2008 conflict and its aftermath are neither founded in law nor substantiated by factual evidence."

**POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT MORE DIFFICULT:**

"The political environment for a settlement of the conflict has in fact become more difficult following the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent States by one of the sides to the conflict."

**THREAT OF NEW CONFRONTATION:**

"Even though both sides stress their commitment to a peaceful future, the risk of a new confrontation remains serious."

## RECOGNITION OF REGIONS ILLEGAL:

"South Ossetia did not have a right to secede from Georgia, and the same holds true for Abkhazia for much of the same reasons. Recognition of breakaway entities such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia by a third country is consequently contrary to international law."

## Links

### International Organisations

- Independent International Fact-Finding Mission: [The report](#)

### Press Dossiers

- BBC: [Georgia 'started unjustified war'](#)
- AP: [EU report: Georgian attack started war with Russia](#)
- RIA Novosti, Russia: [EU war report says Georgia initiated conflict, Russian envoy says](#)
- Reuters: [Snap analysis: Georgia the main loser from EU war report](#)
- AFP: [Georgia, Russia welcome war probe's findings – envoys](#)