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## The Russia-Georgia war

### The blame game

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#### Both sides claim vindication from a European Union report on the war

IF JUSTICE were the ultimate goal, Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's president, and Mikheil Saakashvili, his Georgian counterpart, should appear together in court in The Hague. As their countries' commanders-in-chief, both violated international law during the war in Georgia. So suggests this week's European Union report on the war. Behind them should sit Vladimir Putin, the mastermind of Georgia's dismemberment, and the leaders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia who also acted illegally.

Everyone was a loser in the war that cost 850 lives and left over 35,000 displaced civilians, most of them Georgian. The 1,100-page report was nervously awaited by both sides. Both promptly claimed that it backed their versions of events.

Inevitably, the early headlines were in Russia's favour, because everyone focused on who had fired the first shot. The answer from the EU-sponsored investigators, military experts and lawyers is that "open hostilities began with a large-scale Georgian military operation against the town of Tskhinvali...in the night of August 7th to August 8th." This attack could not be justified. But the report also notes an influx of volunteers and mercenaries from Russia to South Ossetia before the conflict.



While we were driving through Georgia

The report nevertheless says that Georgia's claim of a big military incursion by Russia into South Ossetia before August 8th is not sufficiently substantiated. It also says that if Russia's peacekeepers were under attack—a fact it cannot ascertain—it had a legal right to defend them. But the Russian move deep into Georgia was not "even remotely commensurate with the threat to Russian peacekeepers"; and "furthermore, continued destruction which came after the ceasefire agreement was not justifiable by any means".

In the second phase of the conflict, then, Russia broke the law and Georgia acted in self-defence. The EU report dismisses as illegitimate Russia's justification that it acted on "humanitarian grounds" in invading Georgia. Russia's repeated accusations that Georgia committed genocide were also false. And ethnic cleansing and looting of Georgian villages in South Ossetia took place under the gaze of Russian troops. Neither South Ossetia nor Abkhazia, the report says, had the right to secede from Georgia and Russia's recognition of their independence was illegal.

The report looks beyond Georgia's attack for the origins of the war, calling this "the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, provocations and incidents" for which it blames all sides. The roots of the war go back a decade, and lie in Russia's ambition to impose its influence in its near abroad, clashing with Georgia's ambition to move closer to the West and its obsession with bringing the breakaway regions under control.

Andrei Illarionov, a former economic adviser to the Kremlin who is now a fierce critic, argues that destabilising Georgia was Moscow's policy even before Mr Saakashvili swept to power in the "rose revolution" in 2003-04. Ever since Mr Putin came to power in 2000, Russia tightened its links with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In

2002 Russia changed its citizenship law to allow a massive distribution of passports to people in both regions. This later became a pretext for defending "Russia's citizens". In terms of international law, says the EU report, this had no legal power and challenged Georgia's sovereignty.

Russia backed separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, even as it claimed to be a neutral peacekeeper. South Ossetia's security and defence structures were manned by Russian officers. Russia imposed trade embargoes on Georgian products, and later formalised its links with the two breakaway regions.

It was Kosovo that unleashed Mr Putin. On February 14th 2008, three days before Kosovo declared independence, he told journalists that "if Kosovo unilaterally declares its independence, it will be a signal for us." Months before the war began, the Russians had shot down Georgian drones, dropped bombs on Georgian territory and brought troops into Abkhazia to reinforce its railway line.

Mr Illarionov, who followed Russia's preparations for the war, complains that the EU report scandalously accepts Russia's chronology and ignores facts that contradict the Kremlin's version of events. This, he says, amounts to appeasement.

The situation remains tense. Russia has violated the terms of the peace deal brokered by France's Nicolas Sarkozy, which demands that all sides withdraw troops to pre-war lines and refuses to allow international monitors into South Ossetia or Abkhazia. Before the anniversary of the war in August the temperature rose so high that the EU delayed publication of its report. A renewed military confrontation has been avoided so far, but the report concludes that the risk of another war is serious.

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