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We can and must reverse the Caucasian Anschluss

By Marko Attila Hoare, 28th May 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1. The effective Russian Anschluss with the break-away Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia threatens to be a precedent for potentially limitless Russian expansion and mischief-making in the former Soviet Union and beyond. The defence of Georgia is, therefore, not a matter of a far-away country of which we know nothing, but a vital Western interest.**
- 2. Support for Georgia is one area in which the UK can reaffirm its commitment to the Atlantic alliance, given the lack of enthusiasm shown by our West European allies for this cause.**

3. Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be won over, peacefully and without bloodshed, if we gradually extend to their peoples the benefits of association with the Euro-Atlantic community and draw them into the Western sphere, while offering them real guarantees.

4. We must combine an unqualified commitment to Georgian territorial integrity with a readiness to act as honest broker between Georgia and its break-away regions.

5. By forcing Russia to compete with us in the South Caucasus, in the civilised realm of economic inducements and civic progress, we can deter it from any future adventures of the kind which it has engaged in vis-a-vis Georgia.

Nobody should be surprised that Moscow's mayor Yuri Luzhkov has called for Russia to [annex](#) the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol. Such a move would be the logical next step to the effective Anschluss with the secessionist Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that Russia has carried out since March. Russia has lifted sanctions against Abkhazia, established diplomatic relations with both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, unilaterally increased its military presence in Abkhazia - in [violation](#) of its 1994 peacekeeping treaty with Georgia - and shot down at least one Georgian spy plane over Abkhazia, [according to the UN](#). Russia had already granted citizenship to most Abkhazians and South Ossetians, and the Russian rouble is the de facto currency of both break-away territories. This Anschluss punishes the Georgia of President Mikheil Saakashvili for its attempts to draw closer to the West. A Russian annexation of Sevastopol, as called for by Luzhkov, would similarly punish Ukraine. Through this form of territorial expansion and the dismemberment of neighbouring states, Russia seeks to exert control over its former empire in the ex-USSR. So long as it meets no effective resistance from the West, there is every reason to believe that this expansionist, imperialistic policy - reminiscent, in a somewhat more measured form, of that practised by the regime of Slobodan Milosevic

in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s - will only escalate in the years to come.

Georgia and Ukraine are not alone in being threatened in this way. Through its support for the separatist territory of Transnistria, Russia exerts a degree of influence over Moldova. But the familiar cases of Georgia and Moldova could be only the start of a potentially limitless Russian policy of expansionism and trouble-making. There are about eight million ethnic Russians in the Ukraine; over four million in Kazakhstan; and smaller Russian populations in every former Soviet state - potential irredentas, should Moscow choose to activate them. Then there are existing or potential conflicts between different non-Russian nationalities. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is the most actual, but Central Asia's patchwork quilt of ethnic groups cutting across arbitrary borders provides the scope for plenty more such conflicts, should a Central Asian state be in danger of drifting too far out of Moscow's orbit. Why should an increasingly powerful and aggressive Russia restrain itself in this regard if the method turns out to work well in Georgia? A Western alliance that cannot muster itself to defend with any unity or resolution a NATO aspirant that borders on an existing NATO member, and on the Black Sea, is unlikely to act as a deterrent in more distant Central Asia.

The idea that Russia might limit its destructive policy to its own 'backyard' has been comprehensively discredited by the fact that Moscow has pursued exactly the same policy toward Serbia and Kosovo - which were not even in the Soviet sphere during the Cold War - as it has toward Georgia. In other words, Moscow has prevented a resolution to the Kosovo question, and dangerously heightened tension and instability in the Balkans, in order to hinder Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration, destabilise the newly independent pro-Western state of Kosovo and disrupt NATO and EU expansion more generally. This has been our payback for the Western support of Russia's assault on Chechnya in 1999, which took place soon after NATO's liberation of Kosovo. We should expect a similar payback for our weak response to the Caucasian Anschluss.

Georgia in the late 2000s is, therefore, equivalent to the Czechoslovakia of the late 1930s; at our peril, we treat it as a far-away country of which we know nothing. But just as there were very serious practical obstacles to defending post-Munich Czechoslovakia, so there are obstacles to defending rump Georgia. On the one hand, a NATO-backed Georgian military offensive to liberate Abkhazia - in the tradition of the US-backed Croatian offensive that successfully liberated Serbian-occupied central Croatia in 1995 - is not militarily feasible. Furthermore, like Czechoslovakia in the 1930s and Bosnia in the 1990s, Georgia is a country apparently deemed expendable by a large part of democratic Western Europe, as suggested by the successful German-led resistance to granting Georgia a Membership Action Plan at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April. The US, Georgia's staunchest Western ally, faces a tough Russian opponent, and it has only feeble backup.

Yet for all the obstacles in the way of a successful defence of Georgia, the strongest cards are ultimately in our hands. For all that Georgia is partially occupied, it is also partially liberated. And it is partially liberated thanks to the Western victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War, a victory that did not involve any direct fighting between Soviet troops and the troops of the Western alliance. We won the Cold War because ultimately our political and socio-economic system was more attractive to the peoples of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union than was the Communist system, and because the Soviets' greatly inferior economic power did not ultimately allow them to sustain their military confrontation with us. Essentially the same factors can enable us to defend Georgia and win back Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The 'us', in this instance, means the US, the UK, and other democratic states willing to support us in defending Georgia. The NATO summit in Bucharest showed that our leading West European allies are less than committed to the cause of Ukrainian and Georgian membership of NATO. With German Chancellor Andrea Merkel's Social Democratic coalition partners [veering](#) toward a policy of 'equidistance' between Washington and Moscow, Germany is unlikely to be a pillar of support for the defence of Georgia. France's Nicolas Sarkozy supported the German position on Georgia and Ukraine at Bucharest and even supported Greece's veto of Macedonia's

NATO membership, but still managed to **come under fire** from domestic opponents who accused him of ‘Atlanticism’. The UK’s own Gordon Brown failed to stand by the US, Ukraine and Georgia at Bucharest, a failure that can most charitably be attributed to his inexperience as a prime minister but, more worryingly, may be an expression of a Brownite departure from Blairism that would bode ill for the Atlantic alliance and British security. It is essential that Brown not allow fashionable anti-Americanism or the narrow national agendas being pursued by some of our West European allies to damage relations with our most important ally. Georgia is an issue over which British interests are at stake and which is **close to the heart** of John McCain, the person most likely to be the next US president. It is an issue over which we can reaffirm the Atlantic alliance.

The US is already building closer bilateral relations with former Communist countries over and above those which they enjoy through NATO. Poland seeks a stronger bilateral military relationship with the US because it **understandably feels** that NATO and the EU alone are insufficient to meet its security needs. The US has **signed** a Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation with Macedonia as a response to NATO’s failure at Bucharest to invite Macedonia to join the alliance. The US’s military support for Georgia has long been **very close**. Britain should fully support all these relationships and participate in them as much as possible. Closer relations with East European states, both those that are in the EU and those that want to join, promoted in partnership with the US, is one way that the UK can match the plans of France’s Nicolas Sarkozy for a **Mediterranean Union**.

Increased US-UK support for Georgia, ideally involving Turkey and other NATO members, is one way that we can promote Georgian security. But actually to reunify Georgia involves taking this policy a step further. It means fighting the battle for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, not through force, but through persuasion, as we fought and won the battle for Eastern Europe during the Cold War. The US and UK should promote visa-free travel for Georgian citizens in the US and EU. We should provide scholarships for Georgian students to study at universities in the West and subsidised

internships for young Georgian professionals to work in Western institutions and companies. We should extend these benefits to the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with the promise that they will eventually enjoy all the benefits of EU membership. And we should establish information services in Abkhaz, Ossetian and other languages spoken in Georgia's two break-away regions, to ensure that the Abkhazian and South Ossetian people are made aware of all the present and future benefits that will accrue to them if they choose the European path.

Meanwhile, Georgia's membership of the EU should be brought about as quickly as possible. The Turkish Cypriots were once as implacably opposed to the reunification of Cyprus as the Abkhazians and South Ossetians are to the reunification of Georgia. That they endorsed overwhelmingly the 2004 Annan Plan for Cyprus's reunification was above all due to the economic promise of EU membership and to the desire to share in the prosperity enjoyed by the internationally recognised Cypriot state. Georgia's salvation lies ultimately in its ability to attract the Abkhazians and South Ossetians in this way, which is why its EU membership should not be held hostage to the progress of its reunification.

We cannot compromise on the principle of Georgian territorial integrity. But that does not mean that we cannot play the role of honest broker, and offer the Abkhazians and South Ossetians very real guarantees in exchange for their readiness to embrace the process of European integration within the Georgian framework. With the ultimate aim being a form of 'broad internal sovereignty' for Abkhazia and South Ossetia within a united Georgia, in line with existing [Georgian government proposals](#), we can initiate the dual processes of reconciliation without preconditions between Georgia and its break-away regions, and of integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Euro-Atlantic framework. The launching of the processes of reconciliation and Euro-Atlantic integration will realistically have to come before any Abkhazian or South Ossetian acceptance of inclusion within Georgia, as the leaderships and populations of both break-away regions will not accept any such inclusion at this stage. But the ultimate goal would be, that as they begin to accrue the benefits of association with the EU and US,

and as they gain confidence in the readiness of the Western alliance to guarantee their security, they would ultimately accept inclusion within Georgia. Of course, we would simultaneously need to reassure Tbilisi that the process of Abkhazian and South Ossetian Euro-Atlantic integration is the path to Georgia's reunification, not to the formalisation of its partition. Our readiness to work with Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatists need not imply any recognition of the legitimacy of their separatist goals, any more than the British government's readiness to work with Sinn Fein implies support for the Irish Republican goal of a united Ireland.

A peaceful, bloodless policy of this kind cannot legitimately be accused by anyone of being 'aggressive' toward Russia. Yet by extending the benefits offered by the Euro-Atlantic community to territories considered by Moscow to lie within its sphere, we would be forcing it to compete with us in a civilised manner, in the realm of economic incentives and civic progress. This might serve to deter future Russian adventures of the kind in which it has engaged in the South Caucasus. It might even provide a little catalyst to the process of democratic change within Russia itself.

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