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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## **Lessons of the Georgia Conflict**

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A year ago, the European Union helped mediate an end to a war that left 850 Georgians (including South Ossetians) and Russians dead and 138,000 displaced.

Then, for the first time in its history, the E.U. created an independent fact-finding commission to determine what went so badly wrong and how to avoid a repetition.

I was honored to be chosen to lead that initiative. Our report is now public, and it has important lessons for Europe.

Like most catastrophic events, the war of August 2008 had several causes. The proximate cause was the shelling by Georgian forces of the capital of the secessionist province of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, on Aug. 7, 2008, which was followed by a disproportionate response of Russia. Another factor was the lack of progress, for more than 15 years, in the resolution of the two “frozen conflicts” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

As the special representative of the United Nations secretary general in Georgia from 2002 to 2006, I saw a narrow window of hope open and close in the first half of 2005, after which the differences between Russia and the West over Kosovo, and the deterioration of relations between Georgia and Russia, destroyed any prospect for a substantive negotiation.

Russia systematically gave passports to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, asserting responsibility for Russians in what it called its “near abroad” without any consultation with Georgia, whose territorial integrity was thus increasingly challenged.

Meanwhile, Georgia was pressing to accelerate its accession to NATO, and embarking, with the support of the United States, Ukraine and Israel, on a major modernization of its armed forces. Georgia’s military budget grew from 1 percent of G.D.P. to 8 percent, and military bases near Abkhazia and South Ossetia were modernized.

In 2007 and the first half of 2008, cease-fire arrangements made after the first Georgia war came under increasing strains. Russian forces did not refrain from shooting down Georgian drones over Abkhazia, and dangerous incidents provoked by both sides occurred more and more frequently.

With the presence of the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the European Union, there was no dearth of international organizations in Georgia. But the international community looked the other way, as if it had given up not only on solving the underlying conflict, but also on upholding an increasingly fragile cease-fire.

The stage was set for a violent confrontation.

At a time when preventive diplomacy is rightly seen as a priority, it must be said that the conflict of 2008 was predictable and preventable.

Today, everybody has lost: Georgia is divided; the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are recognized only by a handful of countries; and, most importantly, more than 35,000 people are in forced displacement for an indefinite future.

How could such a disastrous outcome have been avoided? Certainly, better use could have been made of the various international organizations involved. But that would have required a genuine commitment of all the key actors to what the E.U. calls “effective multilateralism.”

In the case of Georgia, the involvement of outside powers unfortunately served to harden positions rather than to build common ground. There was no attempt to recognize the genuine concerns of each party to the conflict.

In the end, unilateralism — indifference to the implications of one’s actions on the other side’s perceptions — became the guiding principle.

The international community can do better, and it does not have to reinvent the wheel to do so. It need only to go back to the charter of the United Nations and to principles it agreed at Helsinki in 1975.

Good neighborly relations require first that the threat or use of force — let alone the commission of war crimes, as those that were committed during the war of 2008 — be totally banished, along with intimidation of small countries by big ones. It also requires that the difficult issues created by the breakup of the Soviet Union, many of which are still not fully resolved, be addressed through genuine engagement and in good faith.

Our report shows that the forces of unilateralism and violence are still very much a part of Europe’s political landscape. A stable European order has to be based on the rule of law and a genuine commitment to multilateralism.

*Heidi Tagliavini, a Swiss diplomat, led the E.U. investigation into the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia.*

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