



Joseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

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Georgia emerged from breakup of the Soviet Union divided by its own separatist conflicts and afflicted with corruption and poverty. It has transformed in recent years into one of the more democratic countries in the region thanks largely to reforms by the government of President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Since coming to power in a bloodless coup called the Rose Revolution in 2003, Mr. Saakashvili has guided his country towards greater integration with the West, seeking membership in NATO and the European Union and sending Georgian troops to fight with American forces in Iraq -- moves that have soured once-friendly relations with Russia, Georgia's far-larger neighbor to the north.

Mr. Shaakashvili also put a high priority on reuniting three regions that refused to recognize federal rule: Ajaria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He found quick success in Ajaria, a Black Sea region on the border with Turkey. Mr. Shaakashvili had hoped to woo South Ossetia back before tackling Abkhazia, but his overtures in 2005 were spurned.

In November 2007, opponents angry about corruption took to the streets in protests that were violently broken up by the police. In response, Mr. Shaakashvili called for a special election. On Jan. 5, 2008, he was reelected to a new five-year term with 52 percent of the vote.

At the same time, voters approved a referendum on seeking membership in NATO, a popular idea after years of standoffs with Russia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The NATO bid further angered Russia, which in the spring of 2008, announced that it was expanding its support for the two breakaway regions.

War began on Aug. 7, when Georgia attacked Russian-backed separatists in Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. Russia responded by sending troops into South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and then driving deep into Georgia.

After meeting with French President Nicolas Sarkozy on Sept. 8, President Dmitri A. Medvedev announced that Russia had agreed to withdraw its troops by mid-October from its positions outside the two regions. But Mr. Medvedev said Russia would stand by its decision to recognize the two breakaway regions as independent nations. The United States and its allies denounced the decision, saying that Georgia must not be broken apart and contending that Russia was violating the cease-fire framework that it signed to halt the fighting.

Human Rights Watch released a comprehensive report of the brief war in January 2009, accusing both Russia and Georgia of using indiscriminate force on civilians. It also said Russia had failed to prevent South Ossetian forces from carrying out "execution-style killings, rape, abductions and countless beatings."

On March 23, 2009, Georgian authorities arrested nine members of an opposition party on weapons charges, as tensions mounted ahead of April protests to call for President Mikheil Saakashvili to step down. Georgia's fragmented opposition began gathering its forces within weeks of the August war with Russia, but the conflict bolstered popular support for Mr. Saakashvili and earlier protests passed with little effect.

On April 9, tens of thousands of protesters marched through the streets of the capital city bearing signs and chanting slogans against Mr. Saakashvili. They gathered in front of the Parliament building to demand the resignation of the president, whom opposition speakers denounced as a tyrant who had mishandled the war with Russia.

Georgia announced on May 5 that it had put down a brief military mutiny that aimed to disrupt NATO military exercises, ratcheting up tensions a day before the exercises were scheduled to begin over Russian objections.

Georgian forces surrounded a tank battalion 25 miles outside of Tbilisi; the government accused Tbilisi's leaders of planning the uprising. A few hours later, most of the unit's 500 soldiers surrendered, and several of their commanders were detained.

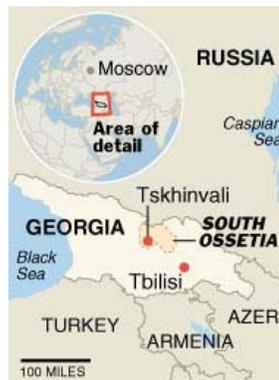
Russia immediately denied any role in the unrest.

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