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# **2012: A NEW ASSAULT ON GEORGIA?**

## **THE KAVKAZ-2012 EXERCISES AND RUSSIAN WAR GAMES IN THE CAUCASUS**

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## **Abstract**

*The author analyzes the Kavkaz-2012 military exercises. These exercises, planned to take place in September 2012 in the Caucasus, are, according to the Kremlin, a preparation for an eventual Western attack on Iran. Due to the fact that troops stationed in Armenia and the Georgian breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia will participate, the huge military exercises have been considered by Georgia as a direct threat. The author argues that the Georgian fear is well founded and analyzes the resemblances and differences with the Kavkaz-2008 exercises that preceded the invasion of Georgia four years ago. In both cases we find the formulation of a credible pretext and perfect timing. A new element is the fact that the exercises coincide with the parliamentary elections in Georgia in which the Russia-friendly 'Georgian Dream' coalition of oligarch Ivanishvili plays a role. The author points also to the possibility of a new land grab in the Southern region of Javakheti where a substantial Armenian minority lives.*

### *Introduction: The Kremlin's Nuclear Sabre Rattling*

On 5 December 2011 the Russian *Pravda* published a bizarre article with the title “Nuclear war on the horizon.”(1) In this article one could read that “this world is as close to world war as it was during the Cuban Missile Crisis.” The author strongly criticized the West, accusing it of lying about the situation in Syria, “inventing incidents that never happened.” It was also not necessary for the West to be concerned about the situation in Iran, because this did “not constitute a threat to global security.” The author concluded that “the forces of demonic evil now have come nose to nose with the forces of reason. Ships from the U.S. and ships from Russia are now on the coast of Syria. Anything could happen.” The article was accompanied by a photo of a nuclear explosion with the subtitle “nuclear war between the two superpowers”. Over the last months such martial and bellicose language has become more common. It can even be heard at the highest levels. In the fall of 2011 the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Army-General Nikolay Makarov, spoke about the possibility that a civil war in Syria “could escalate into all-out war, even one involving Russia, and that could lead to nuclear war (...).”(2) At an earlier date, the same general warned countries that permitted NATO to deploy elements of the ballistic missile defense shield on their soil, could risk a pre-emptive nuclear first strike. When Dmitry Rogozin, the Russian ambassador to NATO, left Brussels in December 2011 to become Deputy Prime Minister, he said that he had planted two poplar trees in the garden of his Brussels house. The Russian word for

poplar is *topol*, the name of the new Russian nuclear Intercontinental Ballistic Missile SS-25 and SS-27. "I decided to leave something behind as a memory of my work at NATO, therefore I planted a poplar," he said.(3) This kind of sardonic 'humour' reminds one of the heights of the Cold War. These remarks are not isolated events. There is clearly a pattern. The *Financial Times* wrote that in May 2012, on the occasion of Putin's return to the Presidency, "in speech after speech (...) Russian officials have tried to out-Dr Strangelove each other in warning of a potential nuclear conflagration."(4) This verbal sable rattling which reminds one of Soviet times must not be taken too lightly. It is clearly an orchestrated attempt to intimidate the West. The only question is: why?

### *The Military Build-Up*

This verbal nuclear sabre rattling does not stand by itself, but is accompanied by the biggest military build-up of the Russian Federation in its existence. In 2011 defense spending increased with 9.3 per cent in real terms, which took it to \$71.9 billion, which meant, according to SIPRI, that "Russia overtook the UK and France to become the world's third largest spender."(5) In an article in February of this year in the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* Putin proudly explained that "we have decided to realize unprecedented programmes to develop the Armed Forces and to modernize Russia's military-industrial complex."(6) Russia's plans are, indeed, grandiose. Its draft budget indicates an increase in defense spending of 53 per cent between 2011 and 2014.(7) This means that official defense spending may reach 5 percent of GDP, while another 4 percent of GDP will be consumed by the security services and the interior ministry. In this way total expenditures for defense, federal police, and the security services may reach 40 per cent(!) of the national budget in 2014.(8) Putin reassured Russian citizens in his *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* article that "this does not mean a militarization of the Russian budget", but at the same time he announced that in the coming decade Russia will spend 23 trillion roubles (close to \$750 billion).(9) The new deputy Prime Minister Rogozin, who is responsible for the military-industrial complex, left no doubts about the Russian plans. In early February 2012 he called for the defense

industries to “develop a compact, mighty, fearsome army armed to the teeth.”(10) This policy of *Kanonen statt Butter* (cannons instead of butter) was not only criticized by the opposition, but also by Putin’s former Finance Minister Alexey Kudrin, who warned that Russia was being transformed into a “militarized police state.”(11) Kudrin said that the money could be better spent on education and healthcare.(12) Moscow has constantly hardened its position. During the “Union Shield” exercises in September 2011 Russian media reported that Syrian troops were invited and underwent training to shoot down NATO aircraft.(13) Moreover, during the past few months, Russia has increasingly resorted to gunboat diplomacy. Moscow not only sent warships to support Bachar al Assad in Syria, but also to Cyprus in its conflict with Turkey over the issue of gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean.(14) However, it is clear that the Mediterranean, although important for Russia, is not a core issue for Russian security. For the Kremlin the real issues at stake lie closer to home. This bellicose language, invoking the risk of a nuclear war, which is clearly meant to intimidate the West, has another function.

#### *In Search of a Pretext: The Presumed Imminent Strikes on Iran*

According to the paper *Kommersant* the question of “a U.S. and Israeli strike on Iran is not *if*, but *when*.”(15) The paper added that “Moscow (...) already prepared for this war.”(16) *How* Moscow did prepare for this war, the paper did not explain. Neither a direct Russian intervention in favor of the Iranian regime is feasible, nor is it clear how Moscow could prevent imminent strikes on Iran’s nuclear installations. But *Kommersant* is right: Moscow *did* prepare for eventual strikes on Iran. Not because Russia plans to intervene, but because Western actions could provide the Kremlin with an excellent pretext to intervene *elsewhere*. In 1956 the Suez crisis which divided the Western allies offered the Soviets an opportunity to intervene militarily in Hungary. In 2008 the Western intervention in Kosovo was used by the Kremlin as a pretext to justify the invasion and dismemberment of Georgia – mimicking the arguments used by the West against Serbia by accusing the Georgian government of ‘genocide’. A new Middle East crisis – on Syria or Iran – is therefore a welcome

event. It could – again - offer the rulers of the Kremlin a pretext to intervene: not in Syria, not in Iran, but closer to home: in the former Soviet space. To be more precise: in Georgia.

### *The Kavkaz-2012 Exercises*

It is in this context that one has to place the preparation of “Caucasus-2012”, (in Russian: *Kavkaz-2012*), military exercises which are planned in September 2012. Officially, the aim of these Russian South Strategic Command exercises is to counter an American or Israeli attack on Iran. However, as is so often the case with Russian projects, behind the façade can hide a very different objective. We need to keep in mind another “Caucasus” exercise: *Kavkaz-2008*, which took place in July 2008, immediately before the Russian invasion of Georgia. In retrospect, this latter exercise functioned as the preparation and the necessary military build-up for the war in Georgia.(17) The coming exercise, *Kavkaz-2012*, will be of previously unseen proportions as concerns its territorial reach, its scope, depth, and technological level. In the first place, the exercises will not be restricted to the territory of the Russian Federation, but will also take place in Armenia and in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the newly ‘independent’ breakaway regions of Georgia. Russia’s 102<sup>nd</sup> military base in the Armenian town Gyumri will participate, as will the military bases in Ochamchira, Gudauta, and Gali in Abkhazia. This means that the Russian exercises will take place directly North and South of the Georgian capital Tbilisi. This fact in itself was already disconcerting enough for the Georgian government to set off alarm bells. In a statement on January 16, 2012, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that Russia’s planned drills, “also involving troops from the breakaway regions was part of Moscow’s policy of militarizing occupied territories and provoking permanent tensions in Georgia and in the entire Black Sea region.”(18) But Moscow’s actions could not only ‘provoke tensions’. Something more sinister might be at hand. It is, therefore, useful to have a closer look at the *Kavkaz-2012* maneuvers, especially at their precise character, their timing, and connection with Georgia’s internal affairs.



### *'Strategic' Maneuvers*

In the first place the maneuvers will not be tactical, as was the case in 2008, but *strategic*. This means that not only the army, navy, and air force will participate, but also the strategic missile forces (nuclear deterrent), the secret services (FSB), the forces of the Interior Ministry, the Ministry of Emergency, and the Federal Protection Service. This complete army will dispose of Russia's most modern intelligence and communications equipment, including satellites, drones, and high-precision weapons, which will enable the Russian military to test the high-tech 'net-centric' system of modern warfare, an approach in which Moscow has thus far lagged behind the U.S. and NATO. The air force of the South Military District has been rearmed with almost hundred percent new helicopters and jets and the exercise will involve GLONASS(19) – the Russian GPS - and the Air Defense Force Management System which controls the skies over Russia and the South Caucasus, including Armenia. Russian airborne troops will be stationed in Armenia, and in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, together with attack and transport helicopters.

### *Establishing 'Transport Corridors' Through Georgia*

The reason for the maneuvers as explained by Colonel Anatoly Tsyganok, head of the Center for Military Forecasting, is that tensions in the Persian Gulf may draw some countries of the South Caucasus into a war against Iran. If that is the case, then how can the logistical supply of Russian troops stationed in Armenia be ensured? Georgia does not allow fuel to be transported through its territory and there is a Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade against Armenia because of the frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Russian base in Armenia actually gets its fuel from Iran. If this provision is interrupted in the event of a war, Russia would need to find supply lines elsewhere. The shortest way for Russian fuel to reach landlocked Armenia is through Georgia.

In the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* the retired Lt. General Yury Netkachev, former deputy commander of the Russian forces in Transcaucasia, is quoted, saying, “Possibly, it will be necessary to use military means to breach the Georgian transport blockade and establish transport corridors, leading into Armenia.”(20) Russia has announced the participation of a “pipeline battalion” in the maneuvers. This is a special battalion tasked with the construction of temporary pipelines (this kind of battalion exists only in the Russian army). The participation of this special unit has raised concerns in Georgia. It is reminiscent of the 400 ‘Railroad Troops’ that were sent to Abkhazia on May 26, 2008, to repair the rail line which connected Abkhazia with Russia. In fact these troops prepared the railroad for the transport of invading Russian troops. Although the exercises are officially planned for September, the preparations for *Kavkaz-2012* have already started much earlier. In the course of 2011 the families of Russian soldiers based in Armenia have been evacuated to Russia. This, in addition, could be interpreted as a sign that Moscow is preparing for an armed conflict. This preventive measure resembles the mass evacuation of civilians from South Ossetia to North Ossetia (in Russia) which started on August 2, 2008 – six days before the war began.(21) These preparations mean also that Moscow possesses the necessary flexibility as concerns the appropriate moment to start its maneuvers.

### *The Timing of the Exercises*

The *timing* of these exercises deserves our special attention. In 2008 the moment for the invasion of Georgia was carefully planned by the Kremlin. The invasion took place on August 4<sup>th</sup>, the very moment of the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing. Vladimir Putin was sitting at George Bush’s side and could immediately tell the American President *his* version of the events. The beginning of August was also a good moment, because it was in the middle of the summer season in which Western chancelleries were undermanned and many responsible politicians were on holiday leave. The inexperienced French President Sarkozy, at that time at the helm of the EU, tried to negotiate a cease-fire, but was an easy prey for the

tough Kremlin negotiators. August 2008 was also well chosen for another reason: it was just three months before the Presidential elections were held in the U.S. At that time, President George W. Bush was at the nadir of his unpopularity and about to leave: a 'lame duck', he was unwilling to be involved in yet another international stand-off.

If we consider the timing of the *Kavkaz-2012* exercises, the resemblance with 2008 is more than striking. Again, there are Olympic Games this summer which will attract the attention of the world. And again, there is a Presidential race in the United States which will restrict Barack Obama's foreign policy options. (This apart from the fact that Obama - unlike Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton - has been generally unwilling to confront Putin's Russia). In addition, there are still two other favorable circumstances which make the summer of 2012 a *moment of choice* for Russian war games in the South Caucasus. In the first place the European Union finds itself in the turmoil of never ending multiple crises: a debt crisis, a banking crisis, a monetary crisis, and, ultimately, an identity crisis. This means that Europe is too absorbed by its own problems to show much interest in events taking place in its Eastern neighborhood, let alone to muster the political will to safeguard its own long-term foreign policy interests in that region.

#### *Ivanishvili: The Kremlin's Secret Weapon?*

A second favorable circumstance is the fact that parliamentary elections will be held in Georgia in October 2012. The election campaign will be rude. A new opposition coalition has emerged: 'Georgian Dream', led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Georgian oligarch who has made his fortune in Russia with his Unikor holding and who is an important stakeholder of Russia's gas giant Gazprom. Ivanishvili, who has returned from Russia in 2004, has more than doubled his worth since 2004-2005 and is recently estimated by Forbes to possess \$6.4 billion. The oligarch has started to sell some assets in Russia for liquidity to pay for his political campaign. "Wealth accumulation on such a scale," wrote Vladimir Socor, "and now the profitable sales for liquidity, would seem inconceivable without the consent of state authorities in

Putin's Russia. Moreover, he will be able to use the liquidated assets against the Georgian government, in line with Moscow's destabilization goals."(22) The parliamentary elections will be important because they will also decide the political future of President Saakashvili, who, after two terms in office, is not allowed to present himself for a third term at the October 2013 presidential elections. There are rumors that Saakashvili could come back as Prime Minister (with a strong mandate after a change of the constitution). The Kremlin, which has never concealed its wish for regime change in Tbilisi, has a clear interest to influence the upcoming elections in October. Ivanishvili's ally Alasania has already warned that the "Georgian Dream" coalition might not recognize the outcome of the elections, although in a recent poll it got only 10 percent support, against 47 for the governing party, United National Movement.(23) Manipulated demonstrations and provoked street violence during the election campaign could eventually be used as a pretext for Russian troops to intervene 'to restore order and defend the democratic process'.

### *The Armenian Minority*

But the Kremlin still has another trump card to play: the Armenian minority. This minority lives in the Southern region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, a region which is contiguous with Armenia. This region has a special interest for the Kremlin for four reasons. In the first place Russia had a military base in the town Akhalkalaki until 2007. It was one of the oldest Russian bases in the region, dating from 1828. In the second place the Armenian minority living in this region feels distinct from the Georgian majority. In a poll conducted in December 2010, 28.3 percent of the respondents believed that Armenia was their homeland and 26.6 percent of the non-Georgian respondents did not know the Georgian language.(24) In the third place this region has already played a key role as a springboard for Russian imperialist projects in the past. In 1921, for instance, a mutiny was organized in this region of (then independent) Georgia, followed by an invasion of Russian troops in Javakheti. Equally during the war of August 2008 there was a fear that Yerevan and Moscow would open here a second front with the aim to establish an Armenian autonomous

region.(25) A fourth and last reason for a special Russian interest in this region is the fact that through it passes the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. 'Independence' for this region, along the lines of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, with the renewed presence of Russian troops in the military base of Akhalkalaki, would give the Kremlin the control over oil transports from the Caspian via Turkey to Europe.

In a recent interview Agasi Arabyan, head of the Armenian diaspora in Russia, declared that plans of Georgia to become a member of NATO goes against the political will of the Armenian minority in Javakheti, because NATO member Turkey is an adversary of Armenia. The eventual installation of a NATO base in this region, he said, "would be directed against Russian bases in Armenia."(26) Arabyan warned the Georgian government that "if they make the republic tomorrow a member of NATO, the people of Javakheti will be against. I emphasize that one must listen to the opinion of the Armenians of Javakheti. If this is not the case, then a scenario is possible in which the local population simply wants to secede from Georgia."(27) The message is clear. A new dismemberment of Georgia could be on Moscow's agenda.

The Russian defense specialist and *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Pavel Felgenhauer wrote on the war of 2008: "The main task of the Russian invasion was to bring about state failure and fully destroy the Georgian army and centralized police force. A failed Georgian state, torn apart by political rivalry and regional warlords, cannot ever become a NATO member and could be easier to control from Moscow."(28) It is a constant trait of Russia's neo-imperialist policy to deny the countries of the South Caucasus the recognition of their viability as independent states. In the same vein Sergey Markedonov, a Russian analyst, recently wrote in *The National Interest*: "Georgia and Azerbaijan lost their conflicts with their separatist provinces, which called their viability into question."(29) Markedonov did not mention the fact that both countries lost their separatist provinces due to Russian military intervention; nor did he mention the fact that despite these territorial losses both countries are still quite viable and that especially Georgia is an example of good governance.

On June 25, 2012, President Saakashvili has repeated Georgia's intention to join NATO. "In 2014 we have a real chance to become a NATO member," he said.(30) The coming Russian exercises are the Kremlin's answer. They directly threaten the existence of Georgia as an independent and sovereign state.

## NOTES

- (1) Lisa Karpova, "Nuclear war on the horizon", *Pravda.ru*, December 5, 2012.
- (2) Stephen Blank, "Putin's Agenda: Gunboat Diplomacy," *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, Volume 8, Issue 225, December 12, 2011.
- (3) "D. Rogozin prigrozil B. Berezovskomu Magadanom," *top.rbc.ru*, January 17, 2012. Available at <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/17/01/2012/633665.shtml?print>
- (4) Charles Clover and Geoff Dyer, "Russia turns up the nuclear rhetoric," *Financial Times*, May 24, 2012.
- (5) SIPRI Yearbook 2012, *SIPRI*, Stockholm, 2012, p. 173.  
<http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2012/files/SIPRIYBc04sV.pdf>
- (6) "Vladimir Putin: 'Byt silnymi: garantii natsionalnoy bezopasnosti dlya Rossii,'" *Novaya Gazeta*, February 20, 2012.
- (7) SIPRI Yearbook 2012, *ibid.*
- (8) Pavel Felgenhauer, "Voters Will Pay For a Military Buildup After Electing Putin," *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, Volume 8, Issue 213, November 17, 2011.
- (9) Vladimir Putin, o.c.
- (10) Quoted in Paul Belkin, Derek Mix, Jim Nichol, "Recent Sales of Military Equipment and Technology by European NATO Allies to Russia", Memorandum to Senator Richard G. Lugar, *Congressional Research Service*, April 26, 2012, p. 17.
- (11) Pavel Felgenhauer, o.c.
- (12) Charles Clover, "Putin unveils plan to boost Russian military," *Financial Times*, February 20, 2012.
- (13) Cf. Paul Belkin e.a., o.c., p. 19.
- (14) Cf. Stephen Blank, "Putin's Agenda: Gunboat Diplomacy," o.c. Blank remarked that "these two disparate incidents show Moscow's willingness to use its navy to defend its friends against threats, and up the ante by threatening others

with major wars. This combination of gunboat diplomacy and brinkmanship is vintage Putin.”

(15) “Sergey Lavrov peredast Iranu posledniy shans”, *Kommersant*, March 14, 2012.

(16) Ibid.

(17) This contradicts the official Russian version that Russia was confronted with a Georgian ‘surprise attack’ on South Ossetia. On the explicit function of *Kavkaz-2008* in preparing for the invasion of Georgia, one can read the excellent analyses of Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Eds), *The Guns of August 2008 – Russia’s War in Georgia*, (Armonk, N.Y. and London: M.E. Sharpe), 2009; and Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World – Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2010.

(18) “Georgia Foreign Ministry Says ‘Russia Is Source Of Destabilization’”, *Civil Georgia*, January 18, 2012.

(19) Cf. Sergey Ilyich Konovalov, “Manevry osoboy vazhnosti” (Maneuvers of special importance), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 16, 2012.

(20) *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, December 15, 2011. Quoted by Pavel Felgenhauer, “The Russian Military Has An Action Plan Involving Georgia If Iran Is Attacked”, *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, Volume 9, Issue 68, April 5, 2012. Felgenhauer remarked that “the geography of the region implies that any such “corridor” may go through the Georgian capital of Tbilisi.”

(21) Cf. Andrei Illarionov, “The Russian Leadership’s Preparation for War, 1999 – 2008,” in: Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Eds), *The Guns of August 2008 – Russia’s War in Georgia*, o.c., p. 73. Illarionov wrote that “By midnight of August 7, more than 20,000 civilians from South Ossetia had been evacuated to Russia. This number constituted more than ninety percent of



the population of the future area of battle and about forty percent of the total population of South Ossetia (...).”

(22) Vladimir Socor, “Ivanishvili Starts Selling Russian Assets For Liquidity,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 9, Issue 93, May 16, 2012.

(23) Vladimir Socor, “Ivanishvili’s Coalition Reveals Destabilizing Potential,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 9, Issue 63, March 29, 2012.

(24) “Most respondents in Kvemo-Kartli and Samtskhe-Dzhavakheti believe that ethnic minorities are protected,” *Kavkazsky Uzel*, April 5, 2011.

(25) Cf. Yury Simonyan, “Parliament Of Georgia Announced Abkhazia And South Ossetia Occupied,” *WPS Agency*, Russia, September 1, 2008.

(26) “Na vstuplenie Gruzii v NATO armyane otvetyat setsessiey Dzhavakheti?” (To Georgia’s entry into NATO the Armenians respond with the secession of Javakheti?), *prava narodov*, January 12, 2012.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Pavel Felgenhauer, “After August 7: The Escalation of the Russia-Georgia War,” in: Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Eds), *The Guns of August 2008 – Russia’s War in Georgia*, o.c., p. 177.

(29) Sergey Markedonov, “NATO Looks to the Caucasus,” *The National Interest*, May 17, 2012.

(30) “Saakashvili: ‘Georgia Has Real Chance to Join NATO in 2014,’” *Civil Georgia*, June 25, 2012.

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