

Hubris, Ate:, Nemesis
(Arrogance, Madness, Nemesis)
Georgia's Trilogy of Tragedies (1. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, 2. Eduard
Shevardnadze, 3. Mikheil Saak'ashvili)
Or A Reply to David L. Phillips (pt. 2)

George Hewitt

‘In [19]92, the Russian invasion bombed Sukhumi and other cities.’ Thus the Georgian president, Mikheil Saak’ashvili, in his attempt on 19th March 2008 to provide ‘information’ (*recte* misinformation) to The Atlantic Council of the United States about the Georgian-Abkhazian war (14th August 1992 to 30th September 1993), which began with Eduard Shevardnadze’s GEORGIAN troops killing those manning the border-post at the R. Ingur crossing and pouring into Abkhazia from the province of Mingrelia in Georgia proper. There are grounds for believing that Russian president Boris Yeltsin had actually given Shevardnadze the green light to take this step in the (mis)calculation that it would be a ‘short, victorious war’ (thereby uncannily anticipating his own parallel miscalculation in starting the first Chechen war in 1994). In fact, the Abkhazians along with their allies from their Near Eastern diaspora and North Caucasian volunteers organised by the Confederation of Mountain Peoples’ of the Caucasus under Yuri Shanibov fought determinedly to defend their ancestral homeland, and, despite losing 4% of their entire population resident in Abkhazia, ejected in ignominy those who had inflicted so much unnecessary suffering on their small republic.

On 29th July 2008 David L. Phillips produced a 76-page treatise under the rubric of the same Atlantic Council of the United States in which he twice states: ‘The author strongly believes that aggression must not be rewarded.’ Reading this statement, those familiar with the facts of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict would be forgiven for expecting to find Phillips advocating suitable measures to be taken against the Saak’ashvili regime, which (i) had introduced military forces into Abkhazia’s Upper K’odor Valley in the spring of 2006 in flagrant contravention of the peace-accords signed in Moscow in 1994 and (ii) had for some time been making bellicose noises about taking back the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, an attempt which many anticipated after NATO’s questionable April-decision at Bucharest not to admit Georgia as long as it was still in dispute with Sukhum and

Tskhinval – the proposal to admit Georgian should have been unceremoniously binned. But, no, the title of Phillips’ piece ‘Restoring Georgia’s Sovereignty in Abkhazia’ gives the game away – it is not Georgia but Russia that is judged to be the aggressor by the American commentator, and it is essentially measures against Russia that are advocated in the article. Whilst the Phillips’ document, aiming as it does to ‘to prevent an escalation of violence’, would appear to have been overtaken by events in the wake of Georgia’s assault on Tskhinval while its residents slept on the night of the 7th August, it is nevertheless useful to examine the remarks and recommendations contained within it for the light it sheds on how certain observers view the problem that ‘democratic’ Georgia poses to the world-community and on the nature of the ill-conceived advice that has been fed to Saak’ashvili and his western-orientated ministers, advice which (coupled with the utterly irresponsible decision to arm Georgia to the teeth) cannot but have helped stoke the latest round of conflict, causing yet more bloodshed and disruption to the lives of perfectly innocent citizens on both sides of the Georgian/South Ossetian divide. They deserve better, and it is how to secure that better future that should be the focus of the world’s attention henceforth.

We begin this analysis and commentary with the document’s Executive Summary. Phillips starts from the premise:

The immediate priority is mitigating conflict. Russia’s recent actions, however, have brought Russia and Georgia to the brink of war. The United States and key European allies should strongly urge Russia to reverse its decision establishing legal ties to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to withdraw its paratroopers. Western allies should also publicly affirm that recognition, *de-facto* annexation of Abkhazia, or acts of war constitute a line that Russia must not cross.

In truth, an entirely different premise is necessary, if one is to understand the roots of the problem facing the world in north(-west) Transcaucasia today: it was the West’s hasty response to the dissolution of the USSR and its arbitrary decision to allow to join the family of nations only the USSR’s union-republics, without considering what internal ethno-territorial difficulties might lie below that level of polity, that lies behind the current crisis. Specifically with reference to Georgia, recognition was delayed because of the unreliable nature of its then-leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and his regime. But the moment Eduard Shevardnadze, who enjoyed (in my view) a far too favourable reputation in the West, returned to his homeland from his Moscow-retirement in March 1992, recognition followed with indecent haste, given that (a) he had no electoral mandate, (b) two wars were raging (in S. Ossetia as a left-over from

Gamsakhurdia's misrule, and in Mingrelia between Zviadists and Shevardnistas), and (c) the country looked set to fall apart. This was no time quite unconditionally to award it this boon. It is true that a ceasefire in S. Ossetia was quickly arranged, but no sooner had Georgia gained membership of the UN than Shevardnadze launched his war on Abkhazia. Whatever might have been the reason, and I have more than once enunciated my view that it was a cynical ploy to try to gain the support of the Zviadists in Georgia's (only authentic) civil war, the decision led to embarrassing defeat and the effective loss of Abkhazia to Georgia as of 30th September 1993. Both the S. Ossetians and the Abkhazians made clear their fierce objection to accompanying the nationalistically inclined Georgians into their post-Soviet independent state. Their views were not taken into account when the West (whether in ignorance or by disinclination to heed the warning voices) chose to recognise Georgia within its Soviet (viz. Stalinist) frontiers. Why now, after 15/16 years of hardship, during which time they have been attempting to build their own lives and after Saak'ashvili's repetition of the blunders of his two predecessors in unleashing the dogs of war in S. Ossetia on 7th August, should they consider submitting to Tbilisi's untrustworthy dominance because an uncaring world airily places the principle of territorial integrity on a higher pedestal than that of the right of nations to self-determination? Georgia clearly lost its war in Abkhazia in 1993, but what penalty has it paid as a result? None whatsoever. With the West's support, energised once a whiff of oil was detected in this republic as a result of the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, it fantasises that it can return to the *status quo ante bellum*; what other defeated state has been able to pretend that a war which it initiated and in which it was defeated never took place and to reassert its rights to territories manifestly lost to it as a result of its own recklessness and incompetent military performance? By associating itself with this lost cause, it is the West (not Russia) which has been and still is contributing to instability and the potential for cycles of renewed conflict, death and destruction. The only solution, and the one that Georgia should be the first to recognise to be in its own best interests, is the recognition of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, so that ALL parties can start seriously to think about how to build a stable and viable future. Is this not the step which any country claiming to be a friend of Georgia should be encouraging it to take?

Next we read:

If Russia crosses this line, the EU should suspend its negotiations with Russia on a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), revoke its visa facilitation regime for Russians, and impose sanctions on Russian businesses investing in Abkhazia.

When Saak'ashvili ordered his troops to shell Tskhinval with Grad-missiles and sent in his bombers, he crossed a line which naturally caused the Russians to respond – rather late in the day and only after 15 of their peace-keepers in S. Ossetia had been killed. The militarisation of Georgia, stimulated by the West's (especially the USA's, the Ukraine's, and Israel's) eagerness to sell it arms can only have been designed to provide it with the means to overrun S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, despite Saak'ashvili's repeated protestations that he had no intention of using force in the resolution of these conflicts. That lie was proven not only with the assault on Tskhinval and but also by the huge amount of weaponry discovered in Abkhazia's Upper K'odor Valley after its liberation from Georgian occupation on 12th August. Saak'ashvili had caused a breakdown in negotiations by introducing troops into this one region of Abkhazia over which the Abkhazians had not taken control at the end of the war in 1993. Saak'ashvili kept asserting to a gullible world that these were not troops but merely policemen. The Abkhazians were not so easily fooled. With Russia determined to dismantle the Georgian military and its munitions wherever these could be located in Georgia proper (a logical step in view of the danger that the Georgians would once again resort to force of arms, if these were left in their possession), Abkhazian ground-forces entered the Valley after two days of bombing only to find the place deserted and all weaponry abandoned – the presence there of such an arsenal can have had but one purpose: an all-out attack on Abkhazia after the manner of that launched against S. Ossetia. It is not so much the action of the Russians in this matter which should be open to question and censure but that of the West: why was Georgia permitted to be armed to the degree that it was? Why was nothing said or done to stop the bombardment of Ossetians asleep in their beds on the night of the 7th August? Why did the West rouse itself only when Russia decided to take action to stop the killing and to neutralise the Georgian forces? Where is the condemnation of the side which started the killing? How can such an unpredictable but predictably volatile partner be seriously considered for membership of NATO? Given the bluster in Brussels from NATO's Secretary General and pack of foreign ministers lining up before the cameras to offer their backing to Georgia, do we now have to understand that NATO stands not for the defence of Western values and freedoms but for the

repression and liquidation of Europe's minorities? Never mind possible sanctions against Russia for crossing Phillips' lines – what about sanctions against Georgia for its latest spilling of the blood of a population whose interests it cynically protests to the world are best served by being (re)subordinated to Tbilisi?

One course of action now open is for Russia, especially after the votes in the Duma and Federation Council on 25th August, (but not only Russia) to consider pre-empting Western action by recognising S. Ossetia and Abkhazia and then to encourage investment in these two regions by firms not interested in trade with the USA, possibly finding such companies in Turkey, where there is certainly a greater understanding of Caucasian realities and the potential for investment there. Tourism is always going to be the most substantial source of income for Abkhazia, and it can perfectly well exist without the presence of visitors from the US. However, a wiser course would be for the West (or, ideally, Georgia itself) to take this step of recognition, as this way Georgia would not see it as a move confirming its sadly all too well ingrained russophobia.

Reading on, we find:

The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) can show solidarity with Georgia by conducting joint military training exercises with the Georgian armed forces, and by including Georgia's Membership Action Plan (MAP) on the agenda of NATO's upcoming ministerial meeting in December 2008. NATO should extend its Combat Air Patrol to prevent further violation of Georgian air space by Russian war planes.

As for US-Russian cooperation, the USA (and the West in general) needs Russia much more than it needs Georgia (proper). All of the possibly dangerous rhetoric directed against Russia and in support of Georgia's latest failure as president recalls to mind a moment from the play/film 'A Man for All Seasons' by Robert Bolt. Realising that his one-time protégé Richard Rich has tendered false evidence against in return for the highest office of state in Wales, Sir Thomas Moore witheringly addresses his betrayer with these words: 'Why, Richard, it profiteth a man nothing to sacrifice his soul for the whole world – but for Wales?!' Why is the West willing to risk confrontation for such a precious cause as the preservation of the Stalinist frontiers of Georgia and to prop up one of the most ludicrous leaders to strut the political stage over recent years? Of course, the most lamentable of US presidents and the most risible of Georgian leaders could be said to deserve each other, but how can one account for the apparent collective abandonment of common sense amongst the rest of

Western leaders? One hopes that wiser voices will soon emerge somewhere in Europe, though there seem to be signs amongst non-governmental or the non-Neo Con community that by no means all American thinking is as befuddled on this question as that of the administration and its promoters. On 22nd August Russia Today aired interviews with Pat Buchanan and Richard Armitage, both of whom spoke critically of Saak'ashvili's initiation of war, questioned the wisdom of NATO's expansion right up to Russia's borders in both Poland and Georgia, and recognised that relations with Russia are far more important than those with Tbilisi; Buchanan even acknowledged America's double standards in forcing a change of the map in the Balkans (Kosovo) but refusing to countenance independence for S. Ossetia and Abkhazia. What of the UK? To judge *inter alia* by the utterances of its ambassador to the UN, the UK is ever more behaving like a candidate to become the USA's 51st state, albeit one whose spokesman in New York can at least reproduce her masters' voices in decent English.

Phillips offers some specific suggestions for reducing tensions. He begins with the welcome suggestion that the Georgian side together with Abkhazia should agree to non-use of force. This is something that the Abkhazian side has been demanding for years, but the demand has been spurned by the Georgian authorities, which becomes perfectly understandable in the light of Georgia's resorting to arms in S. Ossetia and its build-up of weaponry in Abkhazia's Upper K'odor Valley in readiness for an assault in Abkhazia too. The idea that such a joint-declaration should have been accompanied by an opening of the Ingur-border and a phased return of the refugees who fled as the war was moving to its close at the end of September 1993 was unrealistic, however. Abkhazia views the Ingur as an international frontier and would not open it to the free-movement that characterised passage over it during Soviet times. As to the refugees, Abkhazians have naturally been extremely wary about allowing their territory to be swamped again (as it was in the days of Stalin and Beria from 1937 to 1953) by a population which can be so readily manipulated to act against the interests of the indigenous residents in support of Georgian nationalist goals. The reason why there is no problem about permitting the Kartvelian (almost without exception Mingrelian) citizens of the Gal Province to get on with their lives there is that, on the whole, they did not participate in the hostilities, and it should be stressed that nothing has happened (or will happen) to the Gal residents in the wake of the military operations in the Upper K'odor Valley, where the local Svan community

can be expected to return to get on with their lives AS LONG AS NO INDIVIDUALS KNOWN TO HAVE ACTIVELY SUPPORTED THE GEORGIAN INVASION/OCCUPATION TRY TO RETURN. The Kartvelians who preferred joining the rout of the forces they had championed during the war to staying behind and facing whatever the consequences might have been have been appallingly treated by successive Georgian administrations but need to recognise that, for most of them, their future is unlikely to lie within Abkhazia. Of course, after formal recognition Abkhazians will feel more confident about permitting a larger Kartvelian presence outside the Gal District (as long as those concerned swear loyalty to Abkhazia rather than Georgia), but, when it comes to repopulating Abkhazia, it is the descendants of those ethnic Abkhazians who fled Russian control in the 1860s that the Abkhazian authorities are more concerned to have resettled in their homeland. The world knows little about this diaspora (and cares even less, of course).

While on the topic of refugees, there is another group of people who wish to return to their ancestral homes. These are the Meskhians (perhaps better known as 'Meskhetian Turks'), who were one of Stalin's wartime deportees. As the Georgian nationalist movement was getting into full swing in the late 1980s, the urgency of repatriating the descendants of these people was much trumpeted by the then-leader of the oppositionists, the late Merab K'ost'ava (yet another Mingrelian, like Gamsakhurdia). But with growing contacts, it became clear that by no means all of them knew Georgian or professed the Orthodox faith. Interest in their return promptly waned. However, when Georgia was admitted to the Council of Europe (another aberration in terms of Western decisions) in 1999, one of the conditions of membership was that within 12 years those who wished to return to Meskheti (on Georgia's S.W. border with Turkey) should be allowed to do so. Has Phillips asked his Georgian friends how far this process of repatriation has progressed now that only 3 more years are left for it to be completed? Rather than Georgia suffering sanctions for dragging its feet in this matter, the last I heard was that those Meskhians stuck in Russia's Krasnodar region, having been denied entry to Georgia, were actually offered accommodation in the USA (in a move to help Washington's Transcaucasian ally avoid yet another international embarrassment). Perhaps Washington might like to consider taking in the refugees from Abkhazia too; as they are mostly Mingrelian, I am sure they would jump at a chance to live 'the American dream' and make a few bucks.

Rather than insist that Saak'ashvili pull out his forces from the Upper K'odor Valley, Phillips spoke of the need to utilise a NEW group of the (UN Secretary General's) Friends of Georgia (sidelining Russia and incorporating more anti-Russian — and thus 'friendlier' — states, largely from the former Soviet block) from which an international police-force would be constituted for the Valley; the new group was informally constituted in 2005 and comprises: Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Sweden. That would never have been acceptable to the Abkhazians, as it would have prevented them from ever retaking control of that part of their own territory. The suggestion is now dead in the water, as the Valley is back where it belongs (viz. in Abkhazian hands).

Under the heading 'Expanding the Autonomy Proposal' Phillips proposes building on Saak'ashvili's April 2008 suggestion of 'unlimited autonomy'. What the American (like countless others) fails to understand is that the Abkhazians NEVER accepted the reduction by Stalin of their republic's status to that of an autonomy within Soviet Georgia in the first place. They objected to it on a more or less decade by decade basis between Stalin's death in 1953 and the collapse of the USSR; and, indeed, this status (always a fiction in the Soviet context, as would any reconstitution of it in post-Soviet Georgia) can be said to have led to the war of 1992-93. Georgia lost that war, and thereby it lost all right to pretend that the parties could resume the same mutual relationship as obtained between 1931 and 1991. Autonomy died on 30th September 1993 and cannot be revived. All commentators need to start by accepting this simple and fundamental fact.

In the sub-section entitled *Prepare More Effectively for the Return or Resettlement of Refugees and Displaced Persons* one finds the final proposal to be: 'Establish an internationally financed Property Claims and Compensation Commission with emphasis on clarifying property rights.' When has there ever been any suggestion by any Western policy-maker or influential adviser that such a commission should be established to assess the loss to ABKHAZIA and compensate it for the tremendous damage inflicted on the Abkhazians and Abkhazia's non-Kartvelian residents as a result of Shevardnadze's war (not forgetting the deliberate torching of the republic's Research Institute and Archive)? Why is it only those who supported the war and fled when their side lost who should be thought worthy of such compassion and compensation?

In the sub-section entitled *Strengthen Georgian Democracy, including Minority*

Rights there is a recommendation to: ‘Enshrine minority rights by upgrading the constitution to include special provisions to protect and promote minority rights in accordance with international norms’. The Abkhazians might remind Phillips in this respect that, whilst the USSR’s 1936 constitution has been widely regarded as the most humane of such documents, it was promulgated as Georgia’s most famous son, Josef Stalin, was loosing the Great Terror on the Soviet people. The Abkhazians do not trust anything Tbilisi says about those minority ethnic groups forced to live in Georgia’s Soviet borders — they could easily imagine Tbilisi signing up to any suggested undertakings and then breaking them before the ink had time to dry.

On the economy, Georgia is to be given even more aid than previously in order to entice the Abkhazians back into Georgia’s plentiful (but for the Abkhazians hardly bountiful) fold. Trade between Sukhum and Trebizond would then be reopened — there was a brief period in the mid-90s before Georgia exerted pressure on the International Maritime Organisation when such trade provided Abkhazia with direct links to the outside-world — and Russia given immediate entry to the WTO. In other words, continue the Georgian-demanded economic squeeze that has blighted post-war life in Abkhazia for 15 years until the Abkhazians come to heel. This policy has only served to reinforce Abkhazian suspicions of the Georgians and their Western allies, who have hereby demonstrated yet again that they do not have the best interests of the Abkhazians at heart.

As for a reduction in Abkhazia’s international isolation, Phillips looks forward to Abkhazians travelling on GEORGIAN passports benefiting from the pending EU visa-facilitation regime. The vast majority of Abkhazians adamantly refuse to consider accepting a Georgian passport, as they have no wish to be seen (even if just on paper) as citizens of a hostile state. For a number of years once their old Soviet passports had expired Abkhazians had difficulty travelling beyond Russia. This restriction on their human rights was eased after Vladimir Putin permitted Abkhazian citizens to acquire Russian passports. Abkhazian citizenship is not granted to Georgian citizens (viz. those holding Georgian passports). Which citizenship, then, is likely to be deemed more appealing by most Abkhazians?

Under the rubric **Enhance International Security Efforts** the Abkhazians are urged to reign in militias. What suggestions have ever been made with reference to Tbilisi ‘reigning in’ of such terrorist as The Forest Brethren and The White Legion groups operating inside Abkhazia out of Mingrelia with financial underpinning from state-

organs in Tbilisi? These groups were active in the late 1990s, and there was talk of reactivating them earlier in 2008. Was there perhaps some connection here with the bombs that exploded in Gal, Sukhum and Gagra at the start of the 2008 tourist-season, as a result of which many Russian tourists decided to give Abkhazia a miss this year, thereby causing further harm to the republic's economy, which was no doubt the intention of those who planted the bombs in the first place. Unlike Phillips' hesitation to place the blame, we can surely conclude that responsibility lies on the Georgian side of the border.

Among the threat to Russia, if it 'continues to undermine Georgia's sovereignty' are: 'possible boycott of the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014; sanctions on Russian firms trading in Abkhazia; NATO's commitment to Georgia will be strengthened; there will be closer military ties with the USA and provision of further armaments.' The utter pointlessness of the tit-for-tat Olympic boycotts of Moscow and Los Angeles should be obvious to all who remember them, and so why advocate a return to such a failed, barren policy? NATO Foreign Ministers have already reaffirmed their commitment to Georgia and its some-time membership of the alliance, but it will be madness if that membership is ever attained: why should Western lives be put at risk simply to sustain Georgia's anti-Russian attitudes and wild attacks on sleeping citizenry? Those who (like the USA, the Ukraine, and Israel) have armed Georgia to the teeth, even if most of those munitions have now either been disabled or removed into safer keeping, would be better advised to question the wisdom of their decisions in light of Saak'ashvili's demonstration of his goal in acquiring those arms in the first place. One must hope that the recent expressions of indignation in Brussels will have been a mere gesture so as not to add to Saak'ashvili's manifest humiliations and that, just like Turkey's never-ending wait to join the EU, reasons will be found to keep the Georgian upstart, if it insists on pursuing its NATO aspirations, at arms length from the organisation.

The fundamental problem with the approach of Phillips (and so many more like-minded individuals) is revealed in the next quote:

Russia must be convinced that the West is serious about using carrots and sticks to realize a diplomatic solution. Moscow currently believes that it can get the rewards described in this report without changing its approach to Abkhazia.

The Abkhazian and South Ossetian crises are NOT the result of difficulties in the relationship between Russia and Georgia; they are the direct consequence of actions

taken in the dying days of the Soviet period and/or the early days of independence by the Georgians themselves, as a result of which the S. Ossetians and the Abkhazians made it quite clear as the USSR was collapsing that they were totally opposed to being forced to live in an independent Georgia, whose chauvinism threatened the very survival of these peoples. The first post-Soviet Georgian president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, brought war to S. Ossetia (1990-92), which effectively lost Georgia that Soviet Autonomous District, whilst his successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, imposed war on Abkhazia (1992-93), which effectively lost Georgia that Soviet Autonomous Republic.

In the late 1980s nationalism exploded in Georgia. There was much talk of the 'Georgian phenomenon' and of the superiority of the Georgians over other races with whom they shared their Soviet republic. In such hubris lay the start of the first tragedy that was to unfold with surprising speed. This widespread sense of racial superiority and the notion that the state could afford to tolerate no more than 5% of 'guests' on its territory led to the madness of assuming that the S. Ossetians could easily be deprived of their autonomy and quickly rendered politically impotent. Providence decreed otherwise.

When Gamsakhurdia was overthrown, the country found itself facing two wars: in S. Ossetia and a true civil war in Mingrelia (as outlined above). Shevardnadze had been Party Boss in Georgia in 1978 when he had to pay a hurriedly arranged visit to Sukhum to calm the tensions that arose that year when some 130 intellectuals wrote to the Kremlin in order to restate Abkhazia's ongoing desire to be free of Tbilisi's control and to join the Russian Federation (the only course then open to a Soviet entity). He was, thus, well versed in the complicated and deep-rooted nature of Georgian-Abkhazian relations. Part of the solution in 1978 was the upgrading of Sukhum's Pedagogical Institute to become Soviet Georgia's second only university and the introduction of two 15-minute TV news-bulletins per week in Abkhaz (though the 130 intellectuals were fired, and Abkhazia remained incarcerated inside Georgia). The Abkhazians probably felt that after the deposing of the mentally unstable Gamsakhurdia and the return to his stamping-ground of the experienced Shevardnadze, there might be some chance of rapprochement, for surely someone with the experiences of 1978 behind him would understand their needs? But, no, consumed by the hubris engendered by being fêted in the world's capitals and faced with unyielding opposition from the Zviadists, Shevardnadze suffered his own attack

of madness and took the fatal decision to send his troops into Abkhazia on 14th August 1992¹. Nemesis followed 14 months later.

And so we fast-forward to the Rose Revolution of November 2003. Weary of the stagnation of a decade under Shevardnadze (far from surprising, when one considers that he came to prominence under that other progenitor of stagnation, Leonid Brezhnev), Misha Saak'ashvili organised his overthrow. After election-success in early 2004, Saak'ashvili moved quickly against the local potentate who since independence had held the Autonomous Republic of Ach'ara (Ajaria) in a firm grip, Aslan Abashidze. His ousting confirmed Misha in his overweening sense of his own importance, a belief further nurtured no doubt by the way he was lauded around the world, especially in Washington. With arms pouring in, accompanied by military training programmes instituted by the USA and the UK, Saak'ashvili in turn succumbed to the Erinyes and took his own fateful decision to attack Tskhinval on the night of 7th August.

Nemesis was even swifter in coming than it had been for Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze. It was overwhelming; it was fully to be anticipated; it was necessary in its military logic. All those who have argued (or still argue) for a reintegration of S. Ossetia should travel immediately to Tskhinval and justify before the relatives of those killed in the bombardment or those who have lost their homes and possessions

¹ An article in The Independent on Sunday on 24th August addressed the crisis in Western relations with Russia arising out of the events in S. Ossetia. It was written by former UK ambassador in Moscow, Sir Rodric Braithwaite. Whilst the article is unexceptionable in terms of the advice it offers for big-power politics, it contains some errors in reference to Abkhazo-Georgian matters. Firstly, whilst the majority of Abkhazians GLOBALLY may well be describable as 'mostly Muslim' (given that the majority of ethnic Abkhazians live in Turkey), as regards those resident in Abkhazia it is most certainly not correct to describe them in this way, for, if they profess any faith, the majority within Abkhazia are Orthodox Christians. Though Gamsakhurdia and his allies in the Georgian opposition-movement at the time (1989) used the issue of the Abkhazian State University to agitate against the Abkhazians, he/they did not close down the university: the Georgian-sector staff were 'encouraged' to withdraw their cooperation, and this was used as justification to try to set up a branch of Tbilisi University in Sukhum. The issue led to the first ethnic clashes (with fatalities) on 15-16th July that year. The attempt failed, and the Abkhazians simply replaced the Georgian sector at their University with an Armenian sector. It was then not Gamsakhurdia who brought war to Abkhazia and destruction to Sukhum and (especially) the Ochamchira Region but his successor Shevardnadze. Sir Rodric should be well aware of this, as I once asked him at a reception at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office why the West supported Shevardnadze during his post-Soviet stewardship of Georgia (i.e. after he had started his war in Abkhazia). Sir Rodric responded that the West owed Shevardnadze a huge debt of gratitude for his role in bringing down the Berlin Wall. In my view, even if that assertion were true, the West should not have waited to pay its debt until Shevardnadze was active in an entirely different country and in an entirely different capacity. It was this 'paying of the debt' by recognising Georgia immediately after Shevardnadze's return and unconditionally bestowing upon it everything else that it desired that is directly responsible for the ongoing crises in S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, as I here argue in the main body of my text.

the provision to Georgia of the array of weaponry unleashed against them; they should travel to Abkhazia and explain to its citizens why for two years Saak'ashvili has been allowed to live his lie that his troops in the Upper K'odor Valley were performing mere policing duties. It is now clear that the munitions stored there in such vast quantities would have been used for a blitzkrieg on Abkhazia within three hours of the completion of the move 'to restore constitutional order' (yet another lie) in S. Ossetia². The people of Abkhazia know full well that, had such an attack been launched, the West would have responded in precisely the way it did on 7th-8th August to events in S. Ossetia – viz. with silence and inaction. The sinking of Georgia's ships in Poti and the neutralisation of weapons in the Senak'i base by the Russian forces came as a huge relief to everyone here in Abkhazia who would otherwise have found themselves targets. The world needs to wake up to the realities of life in Georgia and change its policies accordingly. There will be no restoration of Georgia's sovereignty over Abkhazia or S. Ossetia – Yak'obashvili, Georgia's Minister for Reintegration, is effectively out of a job. As for Saak'ashvili himself, his considerable talents for arguing that white is black and black would surely win him a niche in any Western public-relations firm, for his days in Georgia are surely numbered.

'Responsibility for Abkhazia's reconstruction ultimately rests with the GoG [Government of Georgia]'. Well, no. Whilst reparations for the losses of the 1992-93 war are still awaited from Tbilisi, responsibility for Abkhazia's reconstruction rests firmly with the government of Abkhazia and with whomsoever this government is able to negotiate contracts.

'Georgia has become the testing ground for the West's resolve to advance democracy, security, and free markets in the post-Soviet space.' In line with this view we often hear that Georgia is a 'beacon of democracy' in the region. When those ritualistically intoning these slogans are asked what they think of Saak'ashvili's dispatching of his baton-wielding riot-police to break up an opposition-rally in Tbilisi on 7th November 2007 or to shut down (albeit temporarily) the independent TV-station Imedi ('Hope'), they tend to see these actions as mere blips on an otherwise rose-petal strewn path to nirvana; as even Phillips puts it: 'The United States was only mildly critical of these events, maintaining that Georgia's democracy is new and prone to mistakes'. Certain other gross violations of democratic norms tend to get

² Speaking in an interview, Richard Holbrooke calmly accepted this explanation and even went so far as to predict a similar action in Abkhazia once S. Ossetia was constitutionally reordered.

ignored: during the May parliamentary elections there was a shooting-incident in the village of Q'urcha on the Georgian side of the Georgian-Abkhazian border which was portrayed as an example of the nefarious deeds of the Abkhazians to frighten these Mingrelian voters, whereas in fact foreign (and Georgian) journalists quickly established that it was staged BY THE GEORGIAN SIDE to cast the Abkhazians in an evil light – the fact that the victims were Mingrelians is significant for its demonstration of the lack of respect paid by Georgians in general to this ethnic group, who have been classified since 1930 as 'Georgians'; during the recent crisis over S. Ossetia Russian TV-channels and websites have been blocked in Georgia; the list of undemocratic practices is too long to list here – interested readers should consult the GEORGIAN website www.humanrights.ge for details. The conclusion is that, if the West is in need of a 'bastion of democracy', it should be looking elsewhere – dare one suggest it take a closer look at Abkhazia?

Though we have only reached page 14 of Phillips' 76-page document, most of the important points have been addressed. However, on p.14 Phillips embarks on a history of the conflict. I shall now correct some purely factual errors in this part of his presentation.

'Prior to the 1992–1993 war, the central question of Georgian-Abkhaz relations was not whether Abkhazia should be a part of Georgia, but on what terms.' We have here a basic flaw in historical understanding: simply because a state exists within certain frontiers at one point in history, it is illegitimate to project into earlier history the existence of that state. Prior to state-formation, central and western Transcaucasia can be presumed to have been home to various tribes, including the Kartvelian-speakers (Georgians, Svans and Zans, a group later splitting into today's Mingrelians and Laz). The Abkhazian Kingdom (late 8th to late 10th century) came to dominate the whole of WHAT IS TODAY western Georgia (but referred to at the time as 'Abkhazia' in recognition of Abkhazian dominance), moving its capital (not 'capitol', as Phillips would have it) to WHAT IS TODAY Georgia's second city (Kutaisi). By right of dynastic inheritance Bagrat' IIIrd came to rule over both 'Abkhazia' (in its expanded sense) and Kartvelian speaking lands also. The sobriquet *mepe apxazta* 'Sovereign of the Abkhazians' in the Georgian chronicles was always the first part of the title of the sovereigns of this united mediaeval kingdom. It is, therefore, wrong to see it as purely a Georgian entity – please note, Mr. Phillips, that Kutaisi was capital of the Abkhazian Kingdom and not of Abkhazia following the collapse of the

aforementioned united mediaeval kingdom in the wake of the Mongol invasion, as you state. Which patriarchal centre oversaw ecclesiastical affairs inside Abkhazia is irrelevant when determining the political ownership of the state – was England prior to the Reformation an Italian state because ecclesiastically the church gave allegiance to the Pope in the Vatican?

Central and eastern Georgia came under Russian ‘protection’ with the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783. These regions were annexed in 1801. Other parts of Georgia proper followed over subsequent years. Abkhazia came under Tsarist ‘protection’ all by itself in 1810 but administered its own affairs until the end of the Caucasian War in 1864. It is not correct to imply that Abkhazia and Georgia were treated in the same way at the same time in terms of absorption into Russia. Phillips does, however, correctly have Stalin downgrading Abkhazia to an autonomous republic within Georgia in 1931. And so, from the disintegration of the united Abkhazian-Georgian kingdom in the 15th century upto post-World War I communist manipulation, Abkhazia had no link with Georgia and most certainly was not any part of any entity known as ‘Georgia’.

It was not the recognition of Georgia within its Soviet frontiers by Russia that motivated the Abkhazians to reinstitute their 1925 constitution, which defined Abkhazia’s status as a full republic – it was the abolition by the Gamsakhurdia regime of ALL Soviet legislation pertaining to Georgia that occasioned this move, since the result of Tbilisi’s decision simply left Abkhazia’s status unspecified.

Following a ceasefire-agreement in 1993, both the Abkhazian and Georgian sides were supposed to withdraw their weaponry from the Sukhum frontline. The Abkhazians complied; the Georgians did not, as noted at the time by international observers on the ground. And so, in fury at the Georgian non-compliance, the Russians returned their arms to the Abkhazians, who finished off the job. It is quite false to say ‘Russian forces fought side-by-side with Abkhaz militias during the takeover of Sukhumi’ – for facts relating to Russian military involvement in the Georgian-Abkhazian war see Dodge Billingsley’s article in *The Abkhazians: a handbook* (edited by George Hewitt, Curzon Press, 1998). Equally incorrect is the simplistic view that 250,000 Kartvelians were ‘expelled’ from Abkhazia at the end of the war. Though acts of revenge did take place (quite understandably, if regrettably) in the wake of the Abkhazian victory, most of those who fled across the border into Georgia did so BEFORE the arrival in their settlements of the Abkhazian forces, as

noted in their 1993 report by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organisation. There was NO policy to effect any ethnic cleansing – the Kartvelian populated areas may well have become empty, but that emptiness resulted from a decision to flee on the part of those who fled.

‘Russia perpetuates these conflicts in order to weaken Georgia, discredit its leadership, and diminish Georgia’s attractiveness to NATO’. By firstly ignoring the problems associated with Georgia’s move to independence in the early 1990s; by being only too pleased to leave it to Russia to sort out the mess resulting from Gamsakhurdia’s and Shevardnadze’s blunders; and then by adopting a wholly pro-Georgian stance, the West has indicated its total lack of concern for the threats to the physical survival of the S. Ossetian and Abkhazian peoples. It is they who are adamantly opposed to being reabsorbed into Georgia. Through its actions the West has achieved what it least wanted, namely the driving of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia into Russia’s embrace. If Georgia had looked reality in the face and recognised the territories lost to it, we would not have been faced by 15/16 years of stand-off and periodic resumption of military activity; people would be getting on with their lives in more prosperous circumstances; Russia’s influence in this part of Transcaucasia would have been greatly reduced; and even US citizens might now be taking in the sunshine on Abkhazia’s Black Sea coast. The West should look to its own mistaken decisions when it comes to laying the blame for the current situation.

Of course, not everything in the Phillips’ document deserves to be censured. For example, we read: ‘Through its adamant and unflinching support of Georgia, the United States has played an unintended and indirect role in fueling the current tensions. The exaggerated rhetoric of recent administrations, but especially the Bush administration, has encouraged a more vocal and assertive impulse by Georgian politicians. Saakashvili is convinced that the support of the United States is unequivocal. Thinking that America “has his back,” he is more prone to take positions that inflame relations with Russia and Abkhazia.’ Quite so!

‘The banning of Georgian-language education by Abkhaz authorities also deters returns.’ But, in point of fact, Georgian-language education is not banned in the Gal District -- it may not be encouraged in the way that I have argued for some years, suggesting that the Abkhazian authorities actively support it on condition that Mingrelian too is taught in the local schools there, but it is still not banned.

‘Abkhaz authorities also rejected the railway consortium’s \$300 million project to

restore the Abkhaz section of a railway that links Russia, Georgia, and Armenia. Even though the package included economic development funds from the EU, Sukhumi feared that the railway would serve Russian or Georgian interests while undermining Abkhazia's national aspirations.' This statement is absolutely incorrect. Despite reservations, the Abkhazians signed the agreement – it was the Georgians who objected to its implementation, when, after they subsequently insisted on making Georgian cooperation dependent on the prior agreement of the Abkhazians to allow the refugees to return, the Abkhazians refused to comply with this belated condition.

As regards constitutional arrangements between Abkhazia and Georgia, Phillips asserts that 'Saakashvili's offer of "unlimited autonomy" set the right tone for addressing Abkhaz concerns', which, of course, it did/does not, for, as we have seen, autonomy is what the Abkhazians were forced to accept between 1931 and 1991, and they will never revert to it. However, Phillips also believes that 'The pre-Bolshevik precedent of confederal union between Georgia and Abkhazia may be instructive, and act as a bulwark against plans to partition Gali from the rest of Abkhazia', adding that 'Federal power-sharing can be more easily revoked than a confederal union'. This is surprising, because at one post-war point the Abkhazians were actually suggesting a confederal relationship with Georgia, and it was Georgia which rejected this on the grounds that confederal agreements can be more easily revoked than federal agreements, and, they argued, the Abkhazians would revoke the putative confederation as soon as it came into force and declare themselves independent. Phillips' suggestion is, thus, rather puzzling.

'Neither Georgia nor Abkhazia wants armed conflict. An explosion of violence is, therefore, unlikely — unless Russia provokes it.' Phillips might care to reassess this assertion as regards Georgia's desire for armed conflict, in view of the quantity of heavy, long-range munitions stored in the Upper K'odor Valley by Saak'ashvili for his 'policemen'. In the same way that the Georgians themselves, without any stimulus from Russia, were responsible for the chauvinistic writings that led the S. Ossetians and Abkhazians in the late 1980s to take steps to protect their own interests, so here it was the Georgian authorities who infiltrated both troops and weapons into the Valley in transgression of signed agreements, and if anyone else was involved, it was those irresponsible Western sponsors who provided the weaponry in the first place – what role in all this could Russia possibly have played?

'The United States and key European allies, like Germany, France, and the United

Kingdom, should strongly urge Russia to reverse its decision establishing legal ties to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and withdraw its paratroopers. They should also publicly affirm that recognition, *de-facto* annexation or acts of war constitute a line that Russia must not cross.’ What the USA and key European allies should actually do is either (i) persuade the Georgian government FINALLY to take one sensible decision and recognise S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, or (ii) recognise these states directly, which would then force Georgia to do likewise. It must surely be obvious to even the dumbest of observers that there can be no question of the S. Ossetians accepting rule from Tbilisi after the uncivilised attack it suffered on 7th August; and, similarly, after ridding themselves of the Georgian presence in the Upper K’odar Valley, the Abkhazians are not going to give up the complete control over their entire territory that it has taken them 16 years to win. If the West continues its obstinate wrong-headedness, it will drive these two entities even closer to Russia, which is not what the West desires, and neither is what many (probably, most) Abkhazians want. But, if they have no choice other than to accept recognition and protection from Russia and maybe a clutch of other states, the Abkhazians and S. Ossetians will be forced to do so, just as they have had no option but to move ever closer to Moscow over the years since they achieved their *de facto* independence in 1992/93 because of the West’s indifference. Such an outcome will in all probability not lead to greater stability in the Transcaucasus, and, if Georgia persists in its intention to join NATO, there will be ongoing tension between Russia and the West/NATO – is this in anyone’s interests?

It was the practice in ancient Athens for the tragedians to enter in the annual drama-competition three tragedies and one comedy. We have examined the three Georgian tragedies. What of the comedy? Saak’ashvili wrote the script of the third tragedy, but a person who spends most of his time delivering exaggerated, bombastic, and (to be brutally honest) often wildly untruthful statements in front of the world’s TV-cameras, whether chewing his tie or not, cuts such a risible figure that one might say that he is, in and of himself, the perfect embodiment of the comedy we seek to complete our picture. Had his extraordinary behaviour not caused so much suffering (to his own people as well as to the S. Ossetians), the world could have enjoyed this theatre of the absurd instead, whereas it is in danger of becoming directly embroiled in the still unfolding tragedy. Rather than rush to Tbilisi to display solidarity with this palpably incompetent leader (as did UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband, who should hang his head in shame for mentioning not once the S. Ossetians in his interview from

Tbilisi with Emily Maitlis on Newsnight, shown on BBC World News), it is time for those who claim an interest in the Caucasus and who are in a position to influence affairs to stand back, reassess the situation from scratch, and find a new *modus vivendi* for the benefit of all participants and interested parties, and that *modus vivendi* will start from recognition of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, regardless of Phillips' or anyone else's protestations or arguments to the contrary.

Appendix

For the sake of balance, it should be acknowledged that the Georgians as a people are warm-hearted, talented and generous to a fault, and so one perfectly well understands why visitors who fly in for a quick visit, such as John McCain, can find themselves bowled over by the hospitality afforded to them. Regrettably, this spirit of generosity, reflected in their adage /st'umari ghvtisaao/ 'A guest is from God', is rarely extended to those ethnic groups living close by or within the territory demarcated by Soviet Georgia's frontiers. Many Georgians also have a rather inward-looking mentality, which makes them more likely to accept what they read in, or hear from, Georgian-language sources. And so, when a vile theory, propounded as an 'academic' justification for the anticipated deportation of the Abkhazians in the late 1940s, the so-called Ingoroq'va hypothesis (named after its leading proponent, P'avle Ingoroq'va), is revived by nationalists in the late 1980s and (reportedly) becomes part of today's school-texts on the history of the western Transcaucasus, the natural inclination is to accept rather than question it, as would perhaps be the case, if Georgians were readier to take counsel from non-Georgians on the matter. This disparity between treatment of Westerners and that of local non-Georgians is not something the likes of McCain, George W. Bush, David Miliband, and numerous others, especially when these easily beguiled visitors have no knowledge of Georgian, can appreciate. Policy-makers should be more wary when lobbyists, backed by contracted Western public relations firms, seek to bend their ears. Viewers in S. Ossetia and Abkhazia will have been nauseated in 2006 to have watched John McCain on a platform with Saak'ashvili in Tbilisi enunciating his wish that 'the peoples of the two separatist regions soon learn what it means to live in freedom' – the meaning of that 'freedom' was all too clearly revealed to the S. Ossetians on the night of the 7th August. And so, Mr. McCain, those in the know do not concur with your recently expressed view: 'We are all Georgians now, my friends'.

One can only hope that the Georgians will now quickly develop a healthier, more outward-looking approach to life and put behind them their habit of electing patently flawed leaders who bring them little but misery in the long run. Three post-Soviet presidents and four wars – quite an unenviable record...

Perhaps the wealthy American think-tanks can give some attention to helping the Georgian people out of this mess, rather than railing against Russia's perceived interference in the country's internal affairs; the Georgians have demonstrated an uncanny knack of cocking up their affairs all by themselves. And it could get worse, for the province of Dzhavakheti, populated almost exclusively by Armenians, looks more to Erevan than it does to Tbilisi, and the neighbouring region of Dmanisi-Marneuli is largely Azerbaijani-populated. And so there are more potential pitfalls of an ethnic nature for Tbilisi to contemplate, if the country does not reorganise its affairs to become more accommodating to non-Georgians (and in this I include the Georgians' fellow-Kartvelians, the Mingrelians and the Svans, whose languages and cultures have been deliberately neglected by Tbilisi for decades) and to the regional interests of (true) ethnic Georgians themselves.

Aqw'a, Apsny

25 August 2008