



# Russia's Military Performance in Georgia

**Tor Bukkvoll, Ph.D.**

**I**N AUGUST 2009, Russia celebrated the one-year anniversary of its military campaign in Georgia. In the Kremlin's view, the war was a demonstration of the Russian armed forces' renewed ability to fight conventional wars. Independent observers have also partly shared that point of view. The Russian president has promised that the lessons drawn from the conflict will lead to changed priorities in arms purchases. Inspired by the lessons of the war, the Defense Ministry promised additional funds for the Russian armed forces and proposed changing its structure from division- to brigade-sized units to improve the armed forces' ability to fight small wars, such as the one with Georgia.<sup>1</sup> This article summarizes the domestic Russian debate and draws some preliminary conclusions about the Russian armed forces.

## The Ground Offensive in South Ossetia

From the Russian military's point of view, the most successful part of the campaign in South Ossetia was the performance of the Russian ground forces in expelling Georgians from the area. The degree of success, however, is relative. How impressive the performance of the Russian ground troops looks depends on the size of Russian numerical superiority in the conflict. Early estimates suggest there were between 15,000 and 25,000 on the Georgian side and between 20,000 and 30,000 on the Russian side. About 3,000 South Ossetian troops and 9,000 Abkhazian troops are included in the Russian figures.<sup>2</sup> If those figures are true, one could argue that the Russian numerical advantage was significant but not decisive. However, some claim that the number of troops on the Russian side has been severely underestimated. Andrei Illarionov, former economic adviser to Vladimir Putin and now a Russian opposition figure, claims that Russia might have had up to three times the number of troops Georgia had. According to Illarionov, most independent Russian experts now think there were at least 40,000 Russian, Abkhazian, and North Ossetian troops in theater, and that an additional 40,000 Russian

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PHOTO: A column of Russian armored vehicles on their way to the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali, somewhere in the Georgian break-away region, South Ossetia, 9 August 2008. (AP Photo, Musa Sadulayev)

troops were mobilized across the border in Russia.<sup>3</sup> If these higher estimates are true, the accomplishments of the Russian ground offensive look less impressive than they initially did.

Russian equipment was either similar or inferior to Georgian equipment; Russia had the most equipment plus reserve stocks. In addition, the Russian forces' fighting ability was a decisive element. In particular, the coordination between artillery and infantry worked well.<sup>4</sup> This must be an encouraging sign for Russian political and military leaders, and goes some way toward justifying Russian president Dmitry Medvedev's claim that the operations in Georgia demonstrated the renewed quality of the Russian military.

Clearly, Russia's ability to conduct and execute large and complicated military operations has survived the difficult 1990s. According to U.S. military personnel who trained the Georgians, one of the major reasons for the Russian victory was that the Georgian forces trained at the tactical level, but underwent only limited reorganization and training at the operational and strategic levels. The Georgian forces had few well-educated, trained officers at higher levels.<sup>5</sup> Accounts of Georgia's performance in the conflict describe declining professionalism in higher echelons. Reports from the battlefield tell of Georgian soldiers who fought well, but within an increasingly chaotic organization.<sup>6</sup> The same was not the case for the Russian forces.

However, one should not rush to conclude that the ongoing professionalization of the Russian army has become a success.

Several sources claim that detachments from the airborne troops and special forces carried out the brunt of the fighting on the ground.<sup>7</sup> Thus, one could argue that the land campaign in South Ossetia demonstrated that the contract infantry (*kontraktniki*) is far from battle ready. One Russian commentator compared the use of airborne troops and special forces in traditional infantry roles to hammering a nail with an expensive microscope rather than with a regular hammer.<sup>8</sup> There are serious doubts about the quality of many Russian contract soldiers. Even army chief of staff General Vladimir Boldyrev admitted in September 2008 that many of them are no better trained than conscripts.<sup>9</sup> On top of that, military leaders sent conscripts to the theater of operation against official policy. Russian

military authorities denied this for a long time, but faced with undeniable evidence, the general staff had to admit that it sent "insignificant numbers of conscripts" to Georgia.<sup>10</sup> However, there might also be other reasons why the airborne troops fought alongside (or in the place of) the infantry. One of these was probably that their deployment by air behind enemy lines was too risky because of the Russian Air Force's inability to suppress Georgian air defenses.<sup>11</sup>

Second, it is not clear how much close contact fighting there actually was. One Russian source claims that this war was fought primarily by artillery and aviation.<sup>12</sup> The short duration of the war probably limited the amount of infantry-on-infantry fighting that could take place.

Third, the dynamics of the ground campaign would probably have been better if the Russian army had been able to use more helicopters to deploy and relocate soldiers in the theater of operations. According to Russian army sources, this took place only to a very limited extent.<sup>13</sup> Problems flying over the Caucasus Mountains delayed the introduction of helicopters in theater, and even when they arrived, they were of limited help. The helicopters previously integrated with the army transferred to the air force in December 2003. According to Russian helicopter pilots, the air force commanders were quite busy with the air campaign and had little or no time to plan helicopter operations in support of the ground troops.<sup>14</sup> A decision to return the helicopters to the ground forces is now under discussion. In addition, the survival of Georgian air defenses and Georgia's possession of man-portable air defense systems made such operations dangerous. Russian helicopters do not have much protection against man-portable air defense systems, which means that Russia's main battle tanks could not count on helicopters to provide surveillance and protection the way they do in many other armies.

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Fourth, the ambush of the ground troops' commander in South Ossetia was a sign of a serious failure in the ground operation. Only five of the 30 armored vehicles in his column survived. While ambushes do take place in war, this incident indicates a failure of intelligence and surveillance.

Fifth, there have been reports of ground units not being sufficiently resupplied with ammunition.<sup>15</sup> "We simply ran out of ammunition, and they surrounded us with grenade launchers," a Russian tank commander explained to the newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets* after two Russian tanks were blown up during the fighting in the village of Zemo-Nikozi.<sup>16</sup>

## The Air Campaign

Russia's inability to suppress Georgian air defenses was probably the most serious flaw in the Russian war effort. Officially, Russia has admitted to the loss of four Su-25 fighters and one Tu-22 strategic bomber. However, in domestic Russian discussions, the figures most quoted are seven or eight Su-25s.<sup>17</sup>

At the outset of the conflict, Russia had about 14 times as many fighter aircraft in the area as Georgia. Despite the fact that air superiority was probably as decisive for the Russian victory as the well conducted land operation, this part of the campaign is also the one most heavily criticized. Besides the unwillingness and/or inability to support ground troops, the air campaign was unable to suppress Georgian air defense systems. Although finally silenced, the modernized Soviet-era Georgian air defenses were operational and a nuisance for the Russian air force throughout the five days of conflict. In the end, fighter aircraft could not suppress them; ground units took them over.

Russian authorities blame Ukraine for substantially strengthening Georgian air defenses prior to the war.<sup>18</sup> Soviet-made, medium-range air defense systems, sold to Georgia from Ukraine, did play an important role, and Russian fighter aircraft were generally not equipped with efficient anti-radiation missiles. Russia is perfectly able to produce such missiles. Why it did not use them is unclear, but one source claims that Russia has not ordered them for a long time because of their high cost.<sup>19</sup> Serious weaknesses in Russian electronic-warfare capabilities may help explain the long survival of the Georgian air defenses.



AFP Photo, David Mdzinarishvili

Debris reportedly from a Russian bomber shot down near the village of Dzevera some 100 km from Tbilisi, 9 August 2008.

I should point out, however, that suppression of enemy air defenses is seldom easy, even with sophisticated anti-radiation missiles, good electronic-warfare capabilities, and well-trained pilots. The Georgians did what the Serbs did in the Kosovo war. They turned their air defense systems on and off so that they were difficult to detect.<sup>20</sup> In the Kosovo campaign, 35 percent of all air effort was against enemy air defenses.<sup>21</sup>

Iurii Nekachev, the former deputy commander of Russian forces in Transcaucasia, thinks lack of training is a major reason why Russian pilots were unable to suppress Georgian air defenses. According to Nekachev, "A pilot who flies 40 hours a year instead of the required 200 cannot become an elite flyer, and if you are not an elite flyer, you are shot down."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, aging Su-25s were the core of the Russian fighters in Georgia. Bad weather severely inhibits these planes, and they have poor night-fighting capacity.<sup>23</sup>

One of the more puzzling aspects of the campaign is the use of a Tu-22 medium range strategic bomber. At the time, Russia said the plane had been carrying out surveillance missions at high altitudes, and S-200 long-range air defenses sold to Georgia by Ukraine downed it. Independent experts, however, suspect that Russia used the plane to bomb Georgian airfields because it can carry about 20 times as much ordnance as an ordinary fighter.<sup>24</sup> This would have been a rational use of the plane except that Russia did it before the Georgian air defenses

were defeated. Ukraine denies having sold S-200s to Georgia, and if the Tu-22 only did air-surveillance instead of bombing, it would probably have flown too high for the Buk and Osa air defense systems.

## Jointness

Some post-war Western accounts talk about a breakthrough in Russian jointness.<sup>25</sup> This assessment contradicts the prevailing view in the domestic Russian debate. Perhaps Western analysts assumed jointness because of Russia's parallel army, air force, and navy operations, but Russian observers talk about a lack of joint operations or coordination among fighter aircraft and ground forces. Although Russian military leaders increasingly give it lip service, they have not yet accepted jointness as an axiom as the West has. The lack of air support for the ground forces in this case, however, was probably as much due to lack of doctrine, training, and technology as to resistance to the idea per se.

Naval operations off the coasts of Georgia and Abkhazia, and a cyber campaign against Georgian government websites, have received considerable attention, but probably did not seriously affect the outcome of the war. A naval task force of 11 ships from the Russia Black Sea fleet participated in the naval operation. They landed naval infantry on the coast of Abkhazia and sank one Georgian missile boat. Their main purpose, however, seems to have been to organize a naval blockade, something that would only have been of real significance if the war had lasted much longer. Similarly, the cyber campaign did not fundamentally affect the military fight.

The most serious deficiencies in the Russian campaign were in communication, command, and control. This is an officially recognized weakness in Russia, and a source of worry for both political and military leaders. Improvements in this area depend on satellite capacity, and Putin's repeated efforts to speed up the fielding of the Russian equivalent of GPS, GLONASS (the Global Navigation Satellite

System) is just one example of the urgency with which political and military leaders regard this problem. The most optimistic hope is that GLONASS can become operational sometime before 2011. In the absence of satellite support, the troops communicated by radio or ordinary mobile phone, and the ability to deliver high precision strikes was limited.

Another deficiency was the Russian lack of unmanned aerial vehicles, the development of which became a low priority in the meager 1990s not only because of poor funding but also because the Russian military never showed much interest in them. Russia used only the tactical Pchela unmanned aerial vehicle in the operation.<sup>26</sup> According to Colonel Valerii Iakhnovets, who was responsible for the employment of the Pchela in the conflict, the images it sent back were so poor that they were basically useless. He also complained that the vehicle "flew so low you could hit it with a slingshot and roared like a BTR armored personnel carrier."<sup>27</sup>

However, one of the first deficiencies Russia has addressed is unmanned aerial vehicles. Russia is buying new ones from Israel in a purchase that is a serious exception to its policy of armament self-sufficiency.<sup>28</sup> One reason the Russian military is going abroad for the new vehicles is its distrust of the domestic arms industry. General Vladimir Shamanov, head of the Air-landing Forces, held a meeting with Russian unmanned aerial vehicle producers and their presentations did not impress him. He exclaimed, "It's all . . . so typically Russian. [They] put together something and then try to pass it off as . . . useful."<sup>29</sup>

The absence of satellite communication and unmanned aerial vehicles impedes the use of Russia's relatively modern precise munitions. For example, many units fitted with the laser-guided Krasnopol artillery missile could have used the missile in Georgia, but they needed something or somebody to detect a target for them and mark it with a laser beam. Unfortunately, Russian special forces operating behind enemy lines are not trained to operate with the artillery.<sup>30</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the Russian military sees the lack of precision munitions as a big problem. General Vladimir Moltenskoï claims that the Russian forces were in possession of precision weapons but that there was no real need for them in South Ossetia.<sup>31</sup> The use

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of overwhelming fire has a prominent place in Russian operational thinking, and if you are not much concerned with collateral damage, you might even prefer the psychological effect of heavy artillery to the less intimidating effect of precision munitions.

## Conclusion

A Russian victory was predestined because of the Russian forces' overwhelming numerical advantage, but Russian land forces fought better than many had expected. The flaws of the Russian campaign seem mainly to have been a result of shortcomings in technology and organization. Russia has not been able to equip even its most advanced detachments with much of the Soviet-designed but still quite advanced hardware that the country actually can produce. At times, Russian forces are not even able to make efficient use of the modern equipment that they have procured. Successful phasing in of new weapons and weapon systems often requires substantial changes in organization and training, which seems to be a particular weakness of the current Russian armed forces.

The Russian military's own interpretation of the war presents it with a major dilemma. On the one hand, there is a natural tendency to brush criticism

aside in order not to blemish the portrait of a successful campaign. On the other hand, admitting failure, especially with regard to weaponry, can be a powerful way to pressure political authorities for more resources. In an attempt to do the latter, deputy chief of the general staff General Anatolii Nogovitsyn has complained that the armed forces for the most part had to fight with old Soviet weapons.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the official figures of 64 dead and 323 wounded, four Su-25s and one Tu-22 downed, and an unidentified number of artillery pieces and armored vehicles destroyed, Russian operations were successful in Georgia.<sup>33</sup> Russia demonstrated that a large force of Soviet-organized, trained, and equipped troops could defeat a small force organized, trained, and partially equipped by the U.S. However, the conflict also revealed many Russian shortcomings and inadequacies. It would be wrong to conclude that the victory was the result of successful military reform in Russia.

More funds can fix some of the deficiencies highlighted in this analysis. For example, money can provide the Russian armed forces with better fighter planes and anti-radiation missiles. Russia is already able to produce them, although some parts of the Russian defense industry now have more orders than they can handle. Sukhoi, for example, can deliver new planes in only three years.<sup>34</sup> Other types of equipment, such as unmanned aerial vehicles and satellite-based command and control systems, will take longer to procure.

Russia's technological base is still insufficient, and improvements here require not only additional funds, but also new cadres for the design institutes, a better organized and managed defense industry, and a better and less corrupt procurement system. Russian military corruption is still on the rise. According to retired General Alexandr Kanshin, up to 30 percent of the funds allocated to defense are currently stolen or misused.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to needing better equipment, the Russian military services need to overcome organizational and cultural incompatibilities that are obstacles to jointness.

Russia seems to be pursuing the current radical military reform with more vigor than it has most other post-Soviet reform programs. However, it is still too early to tell to what extent it will deal with the shortcomings discussed here. **MR**



AFP Photo. Stringer

**Makeshift grave markers stand on the mass grave in which lay the coffins of Georgian soldiers killed during the conflict with Russia, outside of Tbilisi, Georgia, 2 September 2008.**

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A U.S. Army K-9 military working dog from 10th Mountain Division sits at the entrance of a school during a Mega Shura meeting with local Afghan leaders in Jalrez, Afghanistan, 30 September 2009. (U.S. Army, SGT Teddy Wade)