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# OSCE Early Warning in Georgia

Dov LYNCH\*

## ABSTRACT

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Georgia led OSCE early warning and conflict prevention activities. The Mission was established in December 1992 with the mandate to promote negotiations between the parties to the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in order to reach a political settlement. The article discusses the policies and activities of the OSCE in order to prevent conflict and ensure its peaceful settlement in the country.

**Keywords:** OSCE, conflict prevention, Georgia, South Ossetia.

## AGİT'in Gürcistan'daki Erken Uyarısı

### ÖZET

Avrupa Güvenlik ve İşbirliği Teşkilatının Gürcistan'daki Misyonu erken uyarı ve çatışmaların önlenmesi faaliyetlerinde öncü olmuştur. 1992 Aralık ayında kurulan misyon Gürcistan ve Osetya çatışmasında siyasal bir çözüm sağlanması için taraflar arasında görüşmeleri teşvik etmek amacıyla kurulmuştur. Makale, çatışmaların önlenmesi ve barışçı çözümün sağlanması için AGİT'in politikalarını ve faaliyetlerini tartışmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** AGİT, Çatışmaların Önlenmesi, Gürcistan, Güney Osetya.

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## Introduction

To reflect the paradox of reality, the medical world sometimes uses the expression, “the operation was successful; the patient died”. The phrase helps to capture, dramatically, the paradox of success in some situations, when operations may be carried out successfully in their own terms of reference, but fail at a more fundamental level. In the medical world, a heart may be successfully transplanted, but the patient may still pass away, from related or even unrelated causes. The expression can be useful for settings outside the medical world.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been working in Georgia since 1992 with the mandate to support the process of settling the territorial conflict between the Georgian central authorities in Tbilisi and the separatist self-declared region of South Ossetia. Through the OSCE Mission to Georgia on the ground and the activities of the permanent representatives of the participating States in Vienna, the OSCE performed early warning in and around the conflict zone and undertook policies to warn against and prevent renewed conflict. Nonetheless, war resumed in the region of South Ossetia on August 7<sup>th</sup> 2008.

How can we explain the resumption of the conflict? Is this a failure of the OSCE and the participating States? Was there a more paradoxical logic at play on the ground?

In exploring these questions, the argument in this paper is structured in three parts. The first part will examine OSCE mechanisms for early warning and conflict prevention in Georgia. A second section will look more closely at OSCE activities in the run-up to August 7<sup>th</sup>, during the period of heightening of tensions that occurred in 2008. The last part will outline elements of a deeper logic that was at work on the ground. In the end, it was this logic that led events into an escalatory cycle and that worked ultimately to offset the benefits of OSCE engagement.

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Before examining the evolution of developments in 2008, it is important to set out the different OSCE structures and mechanisms that have been engaged in early warning and conflict prevention activities in Georgia.

A few points, first, about the OSCE. The OSCE brings together 56 States, joined by 11 Partner States for Co-operation in the Mediterranean region and Asia, around a comprehensive concept of security, which sets the promotion of human rights, democratization, economic development and environmental issues on the security agenda with arms control, conflict prevention and crisis management. In the OSCE, these are all seen as integral and interdependent components of security for States and individuals.

In this respect, the OSCE works within three dimensions of security: the politico-military, the economic-environmental, and the human dimension. All three

dimensions carry equal weight, are embedded in all activities of the Organization's institutions and Field Operations and are a substantial part of the political dialogue among its participating States. The OSCE is a regional arrangement in the sense of Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter. In this respect, it said to be the primary instrument for early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation in the European and Eurasian region.

The OSCE is mandated by the 56 participating States to address a wide range of security threats and challenges to its participating States and their societies. In this, the OSCE is active in all phases of the conflict cycle. The Organization possesses a strong toolbox for crisis management—including a flexible decision-making structure and institutions specifically mandated to address crisis situations.

The OSCE role begins with the prominent political leadership that is provided by the rotating Chairman-in-Office (CiO) and his/her Special Representatives and Envoys. In the past, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office has often chosen to play a personal role in the protracted conflicts that remain unresolved in the OSCE area. In support of the Chairman-in-Office, the Special Envoys embody the political will of the Chairmanship in established negotiating mechanisms and in taking forward new confidence-building initiatives.

The Chairmanship is supported by the work of the OSCE Secretary General and the activities of the Conflict Prevention Centre in the Secretariat. The OSCE Institutions – the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media – also have strong early warning and conflict prevention mandates and have developed wide-ranging activities to these ends. On the ground, OSCE field operations undertake early warning and conflict prevention through active monitoring and project implementation.

In the case of Georgia, the OSCE drew on a combination of these tools, working at different levels to pursue early warning and promote conflict settlement.

The rotating OSCE Chairmanships were constantly engaged with the objective of conflict settlement through regular visits to Georgia and through the targeted activities of CiO Special Representatives. In addition, the Permanent Council, the OSCE's main political decision-making body in Vienna, regularly debated developments occurring in and around the conflict zones in Georgia, including destabilising incidents. The Permanent Council also provided a forum for the participating States to explore evolving proposals for the settlement of the conflicts.

The OSCE Mission to Georgia led OSCE early warning and conflict prevention activities. The Mission was established in December 1992 with the mandate to promote negotiations between the parties to the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in order to reach a political settlement. A branch office in Tskhinvali, the capital of the region of South Ossetia, was established in 1997 to support this objective.

On 29 March 1994, mandate of the Mission to Georgia was further defined by the participating States to include the creation of a broader political framework, in which a lasting political settlement could be achieved on the basis of CSCE principles and commitments.<sup>1</sup> The Mission was called on to intensify discussions with all parties to the conflict, including through the organization of round tables, in order to identify and seek to eliminate sources of tension and extend political reconciliation throughout the area of conflict. The OSCE was also mandated to make recommendations regarding the early convening of an international conference with the participation of the United Nations, aimed at the resolution of the conflict, including the definition of the political status of Southern Ossetia. In addition, the OSCE was tasked to establish appropriate forms of contact with the military commanders of local forces within the overall context of the CSCE negotiating efforts, to gather information on the military situation, investigate violations of the existing cease-fire and call local commanders' attention to possible political implications of specific military actions. In this respect, the Mission was tasked to facilitate co-operation with and among the parties concerned, and to establish contact with local authorities and representatives of the population and maintain a visible CSCE presence throughout the area.

Unarmed OSCE Military Monitoring Officers (MMOs) played a particularly important role in monitoring the security situation in the zone of conflict. Almost all of the MMOs were based in Tskhinvali itself. Their role involved independent patrolling as well as patrolling with the tripartite Joint Peacekeeping Forces (comprising a battalion each of Georgian, North Ossetian and Russian peacekeepers).

On the basis of the work of the MMOs, the Mission monitored the security situation on the ground, identifying sources of tension and reporting back to the OSCE Chairmanship and participating States in Vienna. By establishing contacts with military commanders of the JPKF within the zone of conflict, they gathered information on the military situation. They also looked into alleged and actual violations of the ceasefire agreement, helping to call attention to the possible political implications of specific military activity. In addition, when there were specific social, economic, political or military issues to be addressed, the Military Monitoring Officers were ready to offer their support with escorts, advice, background information and expertise. Through pooling resources with local authorities, law enforcement and other agencies, the military monitoring officers tried to diffuse tension and enhance security and stability within the zone of conflict. On many occasions, the MMOs, along with the JPKF, served as intermediaries when tension rose in the zone.

In addition, the OSCE supported the work of the quadripartite Joint Control Commission, which was created by the 1992 Sochi cease-fire agreement. The Joint Control Commission comprised the parties to the conflict (the Georgian and South Ossetian sides) as well as the facilitators (representatives from Russia and North Ossetia), along with the participation of the OSCE itself through its Mission. The Joint Control Commission was

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of the Mission activities, see the official OSCE website: <http://www.osce.org/georgia/13265.html>.

entrusted with monitoring the cease-fire and with supervision of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces. The Joint Peacekeeping Forces had been deployed in the zone of conflict since 1992, headed by a Commander that was appointed by Russia and endorsed by the Joint Control Commission.

The OSCE Mission and its field office in Tskhinvali focused on raising issues of urgent concern to the sides, with aim of promoting a results-oriented dialogue and of assisting implementation of agreements that they reached. These activities also helped to develop the momentum for political, security and confidence-building initiatives including between communities. It should be noted that whilst the Mission promoted constructive initiatives, ultimately, the Sides had to agree together to engage with them.

The OSCE also worked on longer-term confidence-building on the ground. The OSCE-led Economic Rehabilitation Programme (ERP) was a flagship project in this respect. Launched in 2006, after a needs-assessment, the ERP drew on pledges worth € 7.8 million to seek to build confidence between Georgian and Ossetian communities in and around the conflict zone through a programme of rehabilitation and economic development. These projects were developed and carried out with the consent of the sides. They involved a range of infrastructure projects, such as rehabilitating water pipelines and schools, as well as capacity building across communities. With the ERP, the intention was to help move forward an often-stalled dialogue and build on the ground a more favourable context for peaceful settlement. Twenty-one donor states took part in the ERP

When launching the ERP, the sides of the conflict settlement process were unanimous in the opinion that implementation of projects for economic rehabilitation of the zone of conflict and adjacent areas could be an effective mechanism for confidence-building and, ultimately, for the full-scale resolution of the conflict. It was also understood that economic rehabilitation had the possibility to create opportunities for developing regional trade and transit using the potential of the Trans-Caucasian Highway (TRANSCAM), improve the investment climate and have an important impact on strengthening peace and security in the whole region. ERP projects aimed at developing small businesses and agriculture, as well as improving infrastructure for water supply, schools and medical facilities – with the aim to bring together communities and to encourage the sides to make joint decisions.

In addition, in order to promote transparency and information-sharing regarding the activities of the Joint Control Commission, the OSCE Mission supported the publication of a JCC newsletter. The Field Office engaged in a plethora of grass-roots programmes that also provided insights into community developments on the ground. These activities included supporting local community projects, promoting civil society development, and supporting the professional development of constructive journalism. The OSCE Mission supported projects involving Ossetian and Georgian communities to promote human rights and strengthen confidence in the civil society's ability to help settle conflicts. Through the NGO Human Rights Centre in Tskhinvali, the Mission arranged training for prison staff, weekly sessions on human rights and English language for teachers as well as Georgian and Ossetian children. It also engaged in activities to strengthen civil society

and to raise awareness of human rights in villages administered by the different sides. The Mission also supported training for Ossetian and Georgian students on international human rights and the history of the Caucasus. As an example, in August 2006, the Mission launched a programme to train 20 teachers from villages and Tskhinvali to teach human rights interactively. The Mission also funded community projects and two-language training centres to broaden career opportunities throughout the zone of conflict.

Overarching all of these activities, the OSCE sought to provide a perspective for the peaceful settlement of the conflict. This was the second platform of effort for the Organization. At the invitation of successive OSCE Chairmanships, a 'Group of Political Experts' met regularly to elaborate draft proposals on criteria for the political settlement of the conflict. The so-called "Baden Paper" of 2000 (named after the town in Austria where it was drafted) was the last major push by the OSCE through the "Group of Political Experts".

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How did these mechanisms work in 2008?

Throughout the year, the Chairman-in-Office (CiO), Foreign Minister of Finland Alexander Stubb engaged actively in seeking to defuse tensions and create the basis for sustainable progress. Throughout a tense period in the run-up to August, Alexander Stubb made regular statements about the dangers of renewed conflict and the need for enhanced dialogue. For example, on 30 April, he stated that developments in the zones of conflict, including a military build-up, had considerably increased tension in the region. He spoke on the phone with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili as well as with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, urging them to defuse tensions through dialogue and confidence-building measures. Stubb called on all parties to refrain from unilateral measures and threats to use military force. One month later, on 30 May, Alexander Stubb met with the Georgian Foreign Minister Ekaterine Tkeshelashvili regarding the situation in Georgia's breakaway regions. After the meeting, Stubb underlined the need to explore new negotiating formats acceptable to the parties to the conflict. On 17 July, Alexander Stubb met with the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice -Georgia's protracted conflicts were at the top of their discussion agenda.

In addition, Alexander Stubb appointed the senior Finnish diplomat, Heikki Talvitie as his Special Envoy to the protracted conflicts. Talvitie was well-known in the South Caucasus, having been the first European Union Special Representative to the region in 2004. Talvitie played an active shuttle role throughout the spring and early summer of 2008, meeting with the Georgian and Ossetian authorities and the Russian government, including discussing ways to enhance the conflict settlement mechanisms. On 10-11 July, Ambassador Talvitie held consultations in Moscow, Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, and with the Commander of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces, to explore how to resume the political dialogue and halt a deteriorating security situation.

The OSCE role in 2008 involved the continual engagement of the Permanent Council and the Forum for Security Cooperation in Vienna. Following the incident on 20 April



2008 involving an unarmed aerial vehicle (UAV) over Abkhazia, the Finnish Chairmanship invoked one of the OSCE conflict prevention tools (Bucharest MC Decision no. 3) to request expert advice from the Forum for Security Co-operation, which meets weekly in Vienna to discuss and take decisions regarding military aspects of security in the OSCE area, in particular confidence- and security-building measures.

In late May, Georgia and Russia activated Chapter III of the Vienna Document 1999 on confidence and security building measures. Chapter III provides a mechanism for consultation and co-operation on “unusual military activities”. The Chairmanship provided the framework for consultations between the parties in Vienna, which took place in three back-to-back meetings on 4 June 2008, which discussed the 20 April UAV incident, the use of UAVs in the conflict zone, and alleged violations of cease-fire agreement.

Throughout 2008, the 56 Ambassadors debated developments in Georgia almost on a weekly basis in the Permanent Council. The last debate before 7 August occurred on 14 July –these discussions followed in the wake of worrying shootings in the zone of conflict and the statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that four Russian fighter jets had entered Georgian airspace on 8 July.

On 7-9 July, the OSCE Permanent Representatives went a step further. Twenty two Ambassadors travelled to Georgia, including the zone of conflict (and as far as the Roki Tunnel leading to the Russian Federation), where they met Georgian authorities, *de facto* leaders from the South Ossetian side, and the Commander of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces.

On the ground, the Mission to Georgia continued to send Activity and Spot Reports back to the participating States, which testified to rising tensions and the danger of escalation. OSCE MMOs reported on the full range of incidents that were occurring. These included the exchanges of fire in Tskhinvali on 3-4 July; the increasing casualties caused by improvised explosive devices in the zone of conflict, the firing incidents in the Sveri/Andzisi area on 29 July and in the Sarabuki area on 30 July.

In the days running up to 7 August, the reporting of the OSCE Mission provided clear early warning of the escalation of hostilities. For instance, on 4 August, the Mission to Georgia issued a report informing the OSCE participating States of exchanges of small arms fire and mortar shelling. These were assessed by the Mission as being the most serious outbreak of fire since the conflict in 2004. The report concluded that unless there is urgent political dialogue between the representatives of the sides, in whatever format, to de-escalate the current military security situation, there was a distinct possibility that the situation could further deteriorate. The OSCE monitoring report of 7 August informed the participating States about the deterioration of the military security situation, the failure of a meeting between the sides and significant movements of troops and equipment on the Georgian side towards the zone of conflict.

Throughout this period, Alexander Stubb issued a number of sharp statements that drew attention to rising tensions on the ground and calling on parties to resume dialogue and refrain from unilateral measures. On 7 August, the Finnish Foreign Minister extended



an invitation to the parties to meet in Helsinki as soon as possible, declaring that “the situation in the conflict zone is extremely tense and requires immediate de-escalation”.

In sum, early warning by the OSCE was regular and unambiguous in the run-up to August 7<sup>th</sup>. A series of destabilising incidents was occurring on the ground; this was reported by the Mission to Georgia, and it was discussed in Vienna by the Permanent Representatives of the 56 participating States.

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So, what went wrong? How can we explain the failure of what seemed an elaborate system of early warning? Is this a case of “the operation was successful, the patient died?”

A first, unsatisfactory but accurate, answer to these questions is tautological: “Early warning works if it works -it doesn’t work if it doesn’t work”. One should recognise that the early warning activities of the OSCE were far from perfect. Monitoring by the OSCE did not extend throughout the entire conflict zone, and did not include the area around the Roki Tunnel, the main access route to the North Caucasus. The OSCE never had the full picture of developments across the conflict zone and throughout the region of South Ossetia. The Organisation, therefore, was not able to report on the whole spectrum of developments.

This being said, a fuller explanation should explore the “patient” itself -that is, the logic at work on the ground in and around the zone of conflict that led to renewed hostilities on 7 August. From this perspective, the following factors can be identified as having worked as accelerators of escalation.

1. The existence of a weak but entrenched self-declared separatist ‘state’ based around the South Ossetian regional capital of Tskhinvali, in a position of mobilization readiness and driven by a firm political determination to consolidate what it saw as its hard-won *de facto* “independence” from Georgia.
2. The increasing territorial complexity of politics in the South Ossetian region itself, with the development of the pro-Georgian Ossetian authorities in the village of Kurta, led by Dimitry Sanokoyev. This placed pressure on the separatist authorities in Tskhinvali and added uncertainty to the military configuration on the ground.
3. The support provided by external forces to the separatist authorities in South Ossetia, including in infrastructure rehabilitation, revenue support and security –counterbalanced by the legitimate assistance provided by Tbilisi to the Kurta-based authorities, also in infrastructure and security assistance. In effect, these constituted two alternative and contrary rehabilitation programmes that dwarfed the OSCE-led ERP, which was designed to knit communities together.
4. By 2008, the agreed framework for conflict settlement had run into the sand. To make progress, two elements had to work together: First, effective monitoring in the zone of conflict by the Joint Control Commission and Joint Peacekeeping Forces to prevent and offset destabilising incidents; Second, serious work on criteria for a political settlement of the conflict by the “Group of Political Experts”.

For all intents and purposes, the “Group of Political Experts” stopped working after 2000. Lacking a political perspective, the Georgian government in Tbilisi became frustrated with the existing settlement mechanisms, from which it disinvested. At the same time, the Russian Federation continued to insist on the first pillar of the mechanisms (the Joint Control Commission and the Joint Peacekeeping Force) whose legitimacy and efficiency was increasingly called into question by Georgia. By 2008, these countervailing pressures had stalled the OSCE’s double-pronged approach to promoting conflict settlement. The Organisation was left working with a *status quo* that hardly existed on the ground and fighting to sustain mechanisms that were off-kilter.

5. The acceleration of the pace of events after February 2008 –including a sharpening militarisation in and around the zones of conflict, the multiplication of incidents on the ground, and the increasingly brazen openness of the different parties involved in these incidents.
6. The perception of local actors on wider international developments mattered –such as developments in Kosovo, the opportunities and constraints seen to be offered by the upcoming elections in the United States, the new leadership of the Russian Federation, the prospects for Georgia of deepening relations with NATO.

From this wider angle, the picture becomes more clear. These factors weaving together, trends on the ground and more widely produced a logic of escalation that was driven by a sense of high perceived urgency from local actors. Entrenched and urgent, this logic coloured the strategic calculations that were being made by different local actors about the costs/benefits of maintaining a deteriorating status quo or taking a risk. The result was war.

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Early warning means little if it is not followed by early action to prevent a potential outbreak of conflict. In this sense, it is hard to take solace from the early warning signs that were emitted by the OSCE regarding developments in Georgia in the run-up to August 2008. Clearly, the international community did not act enough on the early warning signals that were being emitted. From this view, the OSCE ‘operation’ in Georgia can not be seen as having been entirely successful, as sufficient early action did *not* follow. Such action would have required the requisite political will from OSCE participating States to act swiftly and firmly to halt an emerging escalatory logic.

Despite all of the signs of rising tension, putting together an accurate analysis and prediction of developments proved very difficult. Distinguishing between increasingly routine incidents and a pattern of imminent conflict in Georgia was no easy task by early August. Put simply, it is not easy to act on early warning. By August 2008, the international community faced the difficulty of disentangling the ‘usual’ from the ‘extraordinary’ in tensions on the ground. It may have been easy to predict dramatic events if developments continued, but it was not a simple thing to pinpoint tipping points beyond which escalation and war became inevitable, and even less so to then act on this analysis.

There is a lot that can be done to strengthen international early warning and conflict prevention mechanisms in protracted conflicts. At a time when the Mission to Georgia has been closed (31 December 2008), because of disagreements between the participating States, it is worth reviewing the experience of 2008. The Georgian experience showed that the OSCE has a rich toolbox of early warning mechanisms, confidence and security building measures (CSBMs), and crisis management mechanisms. Many were used by the Finnish chairmanship in 2008, but these can be put to fuller use more generally, provided there is the desire to do so by the 56 OSCE participating States. Certainly, OSCE mechanisms could be further strengthened, including through increased analytical capabilities. What is more specific lessons can be drawn from the experience in Georgia – for instance, concerning the area of activities of the OSCE military monitors, which remained territorially restricted. In general, one should also underline the need for greater coordination between international actors.

However, we should not forget the importance of context. In the summer of 2004, in a more conducive context, working with a healthier ‘patient,’ the OSCE helped to halt the escalation of hostilities in and around South Ossetia. In 2008, early warning worked well on the whole. But OSCE actions proved insufficient to offset what had become an entrenched logic of escalation. The picture was sufficiently blurred for early action by external actors to be delayed. In the end, the commitment to escalation from local actors proved ineluctable.