

THE EFFICIENCY OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, GEORGIA, ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA DURING THE RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN CONFLICT IN 2008

Patrycja Rutkowska

*Faculty of Political Sciences and International Studies
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
ul. Batorego 39L, 87-100 Toruń, Poland
patient@op.pl*

Abstract

Georgian - Russian relations always aroused concerns of neighboring countries, as well as the European Union and the United States. The conflict of 2008 aroused interest and magnified the fate of conflicts between the two countries over the centuries. An important role is also played by the disputed territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which was the reason of Georgian aggression. The author focused mainly on military forces of the Russian Federation, Georgia, but also the armed forces of the Republic of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. At the end losses that had involved armies both in soldiers and equipment are shown

Key words: *Russian Federation, Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Russian-Georgian conflict*

The military operation carried out in the Caucasus was undoubtedly Georgian as well as Russian show of force. The latter involved mainly the strength of North Caucasus Military District, which headquarters was located in Rostov-on-Don. The main strength of North Caucasus Military District was the 58th Army.

The North Caucasian Military District was unique for the Russian army, due to the conditions prevailing in the Caucasus, which was not contributing to the stability in the region. The North Caucasian Military District was also subordinate to the Military Group of Russian Forces which were stationed in the South Caucasus. The equipment of North Caucasian Military District was not technologically developed. The district had many bases in the Caucasus. In 2008 more than half namely 55,000 out of the 102,000 soldiers were regular or employed on contract. Before the outbreak of the war in August 2008, on the Ossetia border with Georgia there were three battalions which had the status of peacekeeping troops - Russian, Georgian and Ossetia. The North Caucasus Military District included Russian ground forces, which had a far greater number of soldiers and efficiency than the entire Georgia's armed forces. They consisted of 4 tactical commands that were of a size of division - three

mechanized divisions and one airborne: 19th Mechanized Division, the 20th Guards Mechanized Division, 42nd Mechanized Division and 7th Airborne Division. The troops which participated in the intervention in South Ossetia were mostly 58th Army forces. The whole army and airborne troops consisted of about 102,000 soldiers, 600 tanks, 1,900 IFVs and armored personnel carriers and 1,700 artillery systems. The main role in the conflict with the Russian army played regiments of the 19th Mechanized Division. [Gawęda 2008: 46-49].

North Caucasus Military District arms had in possession older equipment, in particular basic tanks T-72 and T-62 infantry fighting vehicle BMP-1, BMP-2, tracked armored reconnaissance vehicle BRM-1K, armored personnel carriers BTR-80, crawler tractors, older types of self-propelled artillery, rocket launchers BM-22 Uragan and BM-21 Grad [Gawęda 2008: 46-49].

58th Army was the main force in the Russian conflict with Georgia. During the armed clashes it was commanded by major-general Anatoly Churilov. During the conflict with Georgia were sent to Abkhazia: 76th airborne Division, 98th airborne Division with paratroops subunits, as well as Spetsnaz sub-units. Russian paratroops, decided to use Novorossiysk troops. The 7th Airborne - Assault Division began to station at the turn of April and May in Abkhazia. It was supposed to be a reserve peace corps [Gawęda 2008a: 46-49].

Russia's airborne forces in South Ossetia during the conflict were significant. There stationed 4 battalion tactical groups: the 104th Guards Airborne Assault Regiment - one Battalion, 234th Guards Airborne Assault Regiment - one Battalion, 217th Guards Airborne Assault Regiment - two battalions, 76th Guards Air Assault Division, the 98th Guards Airborne Division, 45th Special Reconnaissance Brigade in Kubinka – one company. In Abkhazia participated: 7th Guards Air Assault Division, the 108th Guards Air Assault Regiment - two battalions, the 247th Guards Air Assault Regiment - two battalions, 114th Guards Rifle Division, 31st Guards Airborne Brigade - two battalions and the 45th Detached Reconnaissance Brigade [Gawęda 2012a: 209-212].

During the conflict also the Russian Special Forces were involved. These were two Spetsnaz battalions - Vostok and Zapad created in 2003. They are referred to as Chechen forces, as they consisted of Chechen soldiers who sympathized with the Kremlin. Vostok operated in South Ossetia. The number of soldiers in Vostok battalion is not known, however, it is said that it counted from about 800 to 1,500 soldiers. It is assumed that the number of Vostok soldiers, who fought in Cchinwalii, did not exceed 200. Zapad battalion operated in Abkhazia. The analysts assume that one of its companies was in the Kodori Valley on 10th August [Gawęda 2012: 209-212].

Spetsnaz main task was the removal of snipers and Georgian soldiers, who guided artillery against Russian forces [Gawęda 2012: 209-212].

Russia's navy in the region is known as the Black Sea Fleet. Russia organized two teams to operate on the sea and they had specific tasks assigned. The first group was assigned to patrol the sea areas of Georgia in order to cut off the supply of weapons that were transported to Georgia by the sea. The second team had to blow up the embankment at the port of Ochamchire in Abkhazia to help Russian troops. It is said that they were quite large forces, in particular 4,000 soldiers and armored vehicles [Makowski 2011: 45-48].

Figure 1. The main directions of Russian troops activities during the intervention against Georgia in 2008



Source: Międzynarodowe prawo humanitarne. Konflikt rosyjsko - gruziński w 2008 roku. Tom II, red. D. Bugajski

Figure 2. The composition of the Russian Federation forces of the Black Sea Fleet appointed to carry out the operations in Georgia

	Klasa	Nazwa, nr burtowy	Projekt, ozn. NATO
Okręt flagowy	KRR	<i>Moskwa</i> , 121	proj. 1164, <i>Slava</i>
1. ZO	ODD	<i>Cezar Kunikow</i> , 158	proj. 775, <i>Ropucha I</i>
	ODD	<i>Jamał</i> , 156	proj. 775, <i>Ropucha I</i>
	KoZOP	<i>Suzdalec</i> , 071	proj. 1124.4, <i>Grisha V</i>
	Z	<i>Koyda</i>	proj. 577D, <i>Uda</i>
2. ZO	MOR	<i>Miraż</i> , 617	proj. 12341, <i>Nanuchka III</i>
	OPa SG	<i>Briz</i> , 065	proj. 1041Z, <i>Svetlyak</i>
	Tr	<i>Turbinist</i> , 912	proj. 266, <i>Natya</i>
	ORR	<i>Ekwater</i>	proj. 861M, <i>Moma</i>

Source: Międzynarodowe prawo humanitarne. Konflikt rosyjsko- gruziński w 2008 roku. Tom II, red. D. Bugajski

The first group of ships that were assigned to patrol the waters of Georgia consisted of two large landing ships: Caesar Kunikow and Yamal, anti-submarine corvette and tanker Suzdalec Koyda. The second team of ships, which were supposed to help transport the Russian troops to Abkhazia was a small rocket ship Miraż, border guard patrol boat Britz, minesweeper Turbinist, and spy ship Ekwator [Makowski 2011: 45-48].

At the beginning of 2008, after the re-election of Mikheil Saakashvili as the President of Georgia, the pro-Western policy was born. It aimed at the elevation of Georgia to make it independent of Russian influence; however the help of the West countries would be needed to achieve that. This situation would also set the path, which other countries of the Caucasus could later on follow in their road to independence [Makowski 2011: 45-48].

After the Rose Revolution in 2003, in the Georgian minds gave birth to the idea "of Georgian conquest and the modernization of the army." This came with the introduction of a new military doctrine in 2003, which increased military spending in the country. Among the political-military elite an idea was born to organize disorder in the Caucasus and to gain control over separatist Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia allies, in particular Americans as well as advisors from Israel and Turkey had considerable influence on the desire to improve the state of the military forces [Brażkiewicz 2010].

The aim was to complete the plan to change the army into smaller, but highly trained forces. The aim was to obtain a professional army, which would represent 10% of the whole army; the rest of the soldiers would constitute military reserve force. They started to train reservists whose military potential reached around 100,000 and 65,000 of which were after completed training. Georgian armed forces were supposed to have the latest equipment along with the latest technologies that would allow them to conduct military operations within the framework of NATO. Georgia has been strongly aspiring to achieve this goal [Gawęda 2008b: 48].

Georgia modified equipment and weapons of Russian origin and also purchased new ones. In Ukraine they modified tanks, armored vehicles, anti-aircraft systems, missile boat, in Bulgaria – mortars, in Turkey - light wheeled armored personnel carriers, in Israel - unmanned reconnaissance aircraft, rifles, and in Turkey - light wheeled armored personnel carriers. It was decided to also purchase Air Defense Buk-1M, which is a very difficult equipment to locate by the opponents [Brażkiewicz 2010].

Before the revolution of Roses in 2002, Georgia's budget for the army was 19 million dollars. In 2006, the budget was 317 million dollars higher as it increased to 336 million dollars and in 2007 reached nearly 600 million dollars. As compared to 2002 the amount was already 40 times higher. The budget planned for 2008 was estimated to nearly 990 million dollars. The increase in military spending was carried out at the expense of the Ministry of Health, on which fewer funds were spent [Gawęda 2008b: 49-50].

Expenditures that were made by the Georgian authorities were motivated by the need to strengthen the position in the region in connection with the planned partnership with NATO. Furthermore, they were triggered by alleged aggressive actions of Russia, which supported the separatist Abkhazia. The funds were not only intended for

specialized equipment, but also on the increase in wages for senior military personnel. The pay in the years 2004-2008 increased by several hundred percent. Also air bases in Kobuletti and Kopitnari were expanded, and new bases for reservists were built. The changes that occurred after 2004 were the result of poor appraisal of Georgian troops after the Rose Revolution [Gawęda 2008b: 49-50].

Senior officers of the Israeli army who were no longer serving in the army, e.g. gen. Israel Ziv and gen. Gal Hirsch were involved in the process of creating and training Georgian troops. They helped the Georgian training services, such as the military and the police. Also the help came from Shin Bet - former Israeli Intelligence Service member, or even members of the sub-units of anti-terrorist police. It is estimated that at the same time Georgia could have about 1,000 instructors and trainers from Israel, who were involved in the formation of efficient armed forces of Georgia. For the period 2005-2006 the Georgian Ministry of Defense designated training priorities. These were: a) the modernization of equipment and weapons through the exchange of used equipment, b) providing the equipment for 1st, 2nd, 3rd Brigade so that they are able to conduct operations in accordance with the guidelines of NATO, c) creation of 4th Brigade out of the interior troops, d) improve the operation of artillery by rearming and training, e) training special forces so that they are able to participate in asymmetric warfare and conduct anti-terrorist operations. There is no denying that the Georgian army at the outbreak of the conflict was in the process of forming and retooling. It can be said that the army was small, but the equipment that was purchased after 2004 was quite modern, which meant that the Georgian army was a modern army [Gawęda 2008b: 50-51].

In July 2008, less than a month before the outbreak of the conflict, the Georgian Parliament approved the increase of the Georgian army by an additional 5000 troops, as well as increasing funds for the army of 210 million dollars (Gawęda, 2008b, s. 50-51). the information about the size of the armed forces of Georgia varies depending on the source. According to the British group information - Jane's Information Group, on the eve of the conflict, Georgia had a potential of about 26 900 soldiers, 82 T-72 tanks, 139 BMP-1/2 and BTR 70-80, 7 assault aircraft Su-25SM, 95-caliber artillery systems over 100 mm, including half of which were rocket launchers Grad BM -21 (Gawęda, 2008b, s. 50-51). According to Russian reports from RIA Novosti, Georgian armed forces numbered more than 30,000 troops, of which 20,000 were ground troops, 200 tanks and 200 armored vehicles, about 120 guns caliber over 122 mm, more than 40 missile launchers and 180 mortars. As for the Air Force, a Russian news agency reported that the Georgians used the 5 assault Su-25, fifteen L-29 and L-39 and about 30 helicopters, including 8 arts assault Mi-24 (Gawęda, 2008b, s. 51-53). The Ministry of Defense of Georgia reported, however, that on the first day of the conflict, that is 8th August 2008, the Georgian army had about 32 000 soldiers [Strategic 2007: 2007].

Taking into account the scale of the conflict and the activities that were to be carried out within the framework of the establishing order in the Caucasus the military forces sent to South Ossetia were disproportionately large. During the conflict, the Georgian army was on a mission to 2,000 troops in Iraq and 200 in Afghanistan [Gawęda 2008b: 51-53].

The Georgian Navy bases were in the major ports of Poti and Batumi and there stationed about 1000 sailors. The Georgian Navy had 2 rocket boats: Tbilisi built in

1981 in the Soviet Union that Ukraine handed over to Georgia in 1999. The ship had six barreled anti-aircraft gun at the bow and two rocket launchers Termit. The second cutter named Dioskuria was built in France and handed over to Georgians by Greece in 2004. The ship was equipped with Exocet missile launchers, two torpedo tubes and 2 double-coupled canons Oerlikon [Sobański 2008: 98-104].

In possession of the Georgian Navy there were also 28 patrol boats e.g. Batumi, Kutaisi, Akhmeta, Iberia, Mestia, Tskaltubo. Furthermore, they had 5 hydrographic units 2 landing crafts Vydra, another 2 boats and amphibious Ondatra 4 minesweepers Yevgeenya. On the first day of the war, on August 8th, the Georgian Navy was clearly weakened, as both rocket boats Dioskuria and Tbilisi were damaged and unfit for the warfare [Makowski 2011: 47-50].

Figure 3. Composition of the naval forces of Georgia during the conflict in 2008.

Klasa	Nazwa, liczba	Projekt, ozn. NATO
KTR	Dioskuria	<i>Anninos (La Combattante II)</i>
KTR	Tbilisi	Matka
KPa	Batumi	Stenka
KPa	Kutaisi	Turk
KPa	Akhmeta	<i>Poluchat I</i>
KPa	Iberia Mestia	Dilos
KPa	Tskaltubo	pr. 360
KPa	1	pr. 371U
KPa	5	ex-trawler
KPa	16	–
jednostki hydrograficzne	5	–
KTD	2	Vydra
KTD	2	Ondatra
TR	4	Yevgenya

Source: Międzynarodowe prawo humanitarne. Konflikt rosyjsko- gruziński w 2008 roku. Tom II, red. D. Bugajski.

The actions of the Georgian Navy had to focus on the defense of the territorial waters and on the patrol of the economic zone. Furthermore, the Navy was involved in the support of the defense of the country from the sea and landing troops ashore probably in Abkhazia. Georgia was capable to conduct such actions, because it had fast means

of transport as semi-rigid inflatable Black Shark boats - 12 pieces, 60 pontoons and two other types of landing crafts [Makowski 2011: 47-50].

It is worth mentioning the special forces of Georgia. The Georgians had the Special Operations Group, which size was approximately 1,500 people. It consisted of command - Company Command and its subordinate 3 battalions. Each of them consisted of about 250 people. Each battalion was divided into three companies. Companies were divided into small units, consisting of about 12-14 soldiers. Battalion called "Commando" was organized differently and had a different structure. It consisted of about 600 people. It was also a sub-unit of Spetsnaz, which counted 50 soldiers. The units were managed the Ministry of Defense of Georgia [Tokarz 2012: 202].

It is worth emphasizing the fighting potential that Georgia had during the war. It was considerably increased by the purchase of weapons from the Ukrainians. In 2007, Georgians bought from Ukraine 74 different versions of tanks T-72 tanks, while in May 2008, Georgia bought 20 more tanks, for which the Ukrainians demanded 250,000 dollars per piece. In addition, the Georgian army has acquired, five 2S7 Pion self-propelled cannons caliber 203 mm and 4 radars. Earlier purchases that Georgians did were mainly small arms, armored vehicles, helicopters and howitzers. According to one of the Ukrainian arm industry companies Georgia bought from Ukraine 6% of its total arms exports [Gawęda 2008b: 51-52].

The armed forces of South Ossetia were created in the 90s of the twentieth century, during the war between Ossetia and Georgia. The year 2002 was a turning point for South Ossetia, as it began to invest in the army. They purchased the equipment abroad and used it for training purposes. Ossetia entered into a phase of infrastructure recovery and military training of reservists. All this has taken on even greater momentum after the episodic conflict with Georgia in 2004 [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

Regular troops of the Republic of South Ossetia consisted of 3,000 soldiers and about 15,000 trained reservists, which gave a total of 18,000 soldiers in August 2008. According to the information provided by the intelligence Georgian troops in South Ossetia were grouped in 10 infantry battalions and several independent branches. Individual battalions were ranged from 150 to 250 soldiers. In addition, the unit also worked Interior Ministry contingent, which numbered more than 1,000 officers of OMON, the KGB, Frontier Service and the Diplomatic Security Service [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

Ossetia troops had the tactics of withdrawal; they did not involve in any major conflict areas in order not to be destroyed in the first phase of the conflict. They expected help from Russia, as the first phase was the most difficult for the Ossetia troops. The army of South Ossetia was equipped with weapons from the old, post-Soviet generation e.g. AK-type rifles, grenade launchers RPG-7, CKM, sniper rifles SWD [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

Most of the battalions consisted of 180 to 250 soldiers, for example, the battalion which stationed in Tskhinvali - V BT, counted 180 soldiers equipped had 8 mortars, 2 howitzers, 3 SPG-3 grenade launchers and 2 anti-aircraft guns ZU-23-2. Moreover, Prisi Company was also included in the battalion. It consisted of 150-160 soldiers and had in possession of 5 BMP-1, four 120 mm mortars, 2 82 mm mortars and ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft gun.

The battalion that stationed in Kvaisa consisted of 100 soldiers and had anti-aircraft gun ZU-23-2, anti-needle system, grenade SPG-1 and two tanks T-55. Forces of the Republic of South Ossetia, according to the data that come from the Georgian intelligence, the battalion OMON had about 350 officers who were located in three places, e.g. Tskhinvali, Java and Kornisi. This unit was equipped with small arms including TT pistols, AKS-U rifles, SWD sniper rifles, as well as various kinds of grenade launchers. In stock they also had 3 BTRs, one BMP, as well as 66 UAZ and GAZ cars. The battalion consisted probably of staff command and 4 operating companies [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

OMON was so important because it fulfilled tasks pertaining to staffing border posts, and participated in cross-border conflicts. Another division, which operated on a similar principle as OMON, was SOBR- Special Rapid Reaction Unit. The task of this unit during the war was fighting on the streets of Tskhinvali. SOBR consisted of about 45 people, armed like the OMON [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

In the defending of Tskhinvali members of Gosochrany also took part. They are also known as the state security services. The number Gosochrany troops are not fully known. It is reported that it had no more than 50 people; however there are also indications that it had 3 times more people. The main task of Gosochrany was the protection of the state facilities and to the security of the leaders. They played an important role in the battle for Tskhinvali [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

Another paramilitary branch involved in the conflict on the part of the Republic of South Ossetia was the Frontier Service. In August, it had about 380 officers. It was equipped with machine guns, mortars, grenade launchers, AK pistols, as well as armored personnel carriers BTR-80 [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

It is hard to assess and describe the structure of the armed forces of Abkhazia, since there is no official information on this subject. It is difficult to talk about the Abkhazian army as large formations, which would have saved their territory from the Georgian attack. Just before the outbreak of the conflict, the Russians sent their troops to Abkhazia under the pretext of building a railway that leads to Sochi which had held the Olympic Games. The Russian troops consisted of 400 soldiers [Dziennik.pl 2010].

After a few days of the conflict, each party had to start counting losses among soldiers, civilians, infrastructure and military equipment. Each party had a difficulty to estimate the damages and unambiguously determine the balance. Also, it was difficult to refer to international public opinion as the information provided by each of the parties was not always reliable and true [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

Russia in the first days of the end of the conflict had announced a loss of soldiers. Military General Staff of the Russian Federation initially presented to public information a list of people, and 74 people were killed in the fighting, 19 soldiers were missing and 323 were wounded. In 20th August 2008 Anatoly Nogovitsin - Deputy Chief of General Staff of the Russian armed forces in a public speech announced that the earlier estimates were underdeveloped and during the conflict 64 soldiers died and no soldier was missing [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

In February 2009, Russia Deputy Minister of Defense gave an interview to Echo of Moscow radio station, where he reported that 64 soldiers were killed, and the number of injured was 283. The number of missing soldiers once again changed and was 3. It is difficult to estimate how many soldiers from the Russian Federation were killed

during the conflict with Georgia, but the losses compared to those incurred by the Georgians were very small. As for the loss of weaponry suffered by the Russian army, the details should be taken from both sources, that is, the information provided by Russia itself, but also the information that was given by Georgia (Brażkiewicz, 2010). According to official reports from Russia, the Russian air force lost 4 planes, in particular 3 Su-25 and 1 Tu22M3. However, there was also unofficial information on Russian websites that 11 machines were damaged; 5 completely destroyed and 6 damaged [Gawęda 2012b: 223-237].

As far as the loss of equipment is concerned of the Russian side, the number provided by Georgia was much higher. Georgian authorities announced that they were able to shoot down 21 Russian planes. This was not only done by the Georgian planes, but also by infantry soldiers armed with Israeli anti-aircraft systems [Gawęda 2012b: 223-232].

The total losses incurred by Georgia reported by the Georgian media were also not clear. However, most often it said that 169 soldiers, 16 police officers and about 228 civilian victims died in the conflict (Brażkiewicz, 2010). However, the Georgian authorities provide different data in this respect. It is worth mentioning that all this information appears to be underestimated. It is said that in fact 215 people were killed in particular 69 civilians, 133 soldiers and 13 police officers. There were also 1,496 people wounded and missing [Gawęda 2008b: 51-53].

These losses compared to the Russian losses were huge, and taking into account that the conflict lasted only five days, the scale is large. Huge amounts of Georgian civilians were fleeing from the conflict areas, often in search of a new place to live [Brażkiewicz 2010].

Some postwar analyzes estimate that the Georgian army could lose up to about 4,500 soldiers. According to estimates created by NATO in the fighting in South Ossetia 200 soldiers were killed and 1,700 were wounded [Gawęda 2008b: 51-53].

The representative of the Russian land forces, Igor Konashenkov, announced that the Russian troops destroyed a total of 3 Su-25, 2 L-29, 3 AN-2, 2 Mi-24 and Mi-14 [Web.archive 2014].

In Tskhinvali, Georgia lost a large amount of heavy equipment, including tanks. Georgians left the equipment and military vehicles when they ran away in panic. The Russians took over all the equipment left by the Georgian army. They took over also the military bases that were not evacuated, airports and warehouses. They occupied the port in Poti, and bases in Senaki and Zugdidi. Abkhazians also did not fail to take the arms that Georgians left behind. They obtained significant amounts of mortars, rocket launchers Grad-21, as well as large quantities of arms [Gawęda 2008b: 51-53].

According to Russian statistics, the Russians overtook 24 T-72 tanks, 15 BMP-2 and BMP-U1, as well as rocket launchers, anti-tank gun and Ural trucks. Russians probably also obtained 4 Hummer vehicles that American army provided to Georgia [Gawęda 2008b: 51-53].

Georgian armed forces were not prepared to fight with such intensity. They planned blitzkrieg attack, but dreams of a rapid occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia had not been fulfilled, and yielded only loss and shame on the international arena. The information about the losses of Ossetia and Abkhazian are not fully known. The data varies. On 4th September 2008 the commission of inquiry investigating the

conflict in South Ossetia announced that 365 people were killed, however they did not state how many of these people were soldiers and how many were civilians.

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