

Europe stands up to Russia

The European Union has wobbled woefully, yet Russia too will pay dearly for its Georgian adventure



IT IS now close to a month since the reckless Georgian effort to retake breakaway South Ossetia by force sparked off what Russia is now calling its August war. There is no new iron curtain descending across Europe, no ideologically based

"new cold war"; but there is a deep, wounding division that stretches far beyond wrecked Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, from Tallinn on the Baltic to Tbilisi and beyond, the violence of the past month, along with Russia's assertions of its "privileged interests" in its far-flung neighbourhood, has done more damage to relations between Russia and the West than Russia's leaders think they need to care about and many Europeans care to admit.

That was the background against which Europe's squabbling leaders met on September 1st. The talk the day before was that it would be impossible for the hawks (such as Britain and the Baltics) to agree on anything with the gas-swalling Russophiles (such as Italy and Germany). A day later they had united enough to condemn Russia's actions and produce a punishment of sorts: there will be no talks on a new partnership agreement between Russia and the EU until Russian troops leave Georgia proper and resume their positions of August 6th (see pages 29-32). Yet a smirking Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev do not seem to be quaking in their boots—indeed they think they have triumphed diplomatically as well.

Like a chocolate fireguard

In fact both Europe and Russia have lost. The European response has been weak. No doubt, it was a little tougher than some predicted a week ago, but jump back a month. In early August Mr Putin would not have dared imagine that Russia could invade and partially occupy a neighbour for the first time since the cold war, let alone recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states—and meet such a wobble. It is not just that the partnership talks matter little to the Russians. The Europeans have not even insisted on formal restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity before they start; merely a withdrawal of troops, which Mr Medvedev promised anyway. EU leaders have in effect condoned Russia's smash and grab.

Thus the second casualty, after wretched Georgia, is the idea of a common European foreign and security policy. This was supposed to be a morally superior combination of the soft power of Europe's economic attraction (morally superior, of course, to trigger-happier America) with an occasional harder edge only in the lawless bits of the world beyond Europe's shores. After Georgia's folly, not even the United States was proposing to take on Russian tanks as they rolled in. Yet how quickly talk of sending EU troops to uphold the ceasefire that Russia was flouting died away. Instead, civilian EU monitors—not even the paramilitary police Europeans claim to be their speciality and who might protect Georgian villagers from South Ossetian militias—may eventually, if Russia agrees, join those from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in

Europe, a body to which Russia belongs.

Such a collective Euro-shrug only stores up trouble, since there are other places where Russia enjoys fomenting bother. NATO needs to reassure all its members, including places like Estonia and Latvia with large Russian minorities, that they are protected by the alliance's mutual defence guarantees. Harder to help will be Ukraine, genuinely divided over whether its closest ties should be with the West or with Russia, and with plenty of ethnic Russians. But the EU can do more to encourage economic reform and the fight against corruption.

In fact the most useful cure for the Eurowobbles over Russia lies not in diplomacy but in Europe's internal market: liberalising the EU'S energy markets and where possible connecting up its internal supply lines. It makes economic sense and does not involve picking a needless fight with Russia. As long as governments like Germany's prefer to cut separate deals with Russia, Europe's inevitable dependence on Russian oil and gas will always offer a tempting way for an opportunistic Kremlin to exert pressure on this country or that, by turning off the taps for "pipeline repairs". Recent promises that Russia will remain a reliable energy supplier should be viewed warily.

Imperious follies

Mr Putin once described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. That is not a view shared by Georgia, Ukraine, the Baltic states or the Central Asian countries that escaped the Soviet empire to win their independence. Yet his aim is to restore Russia as a great power, not to bring back communism as a global ideology. His officials insist that Russia wants more respect, not more territory. Thus, after what many Russians see as years of slights from the West, NATO'S suspension of co-operation has been swatted aside. So has the unprecedented rebuke from Russia's G8 partners in the world's premier political club.

Yet the limits of Russia's August "victory" are becoming clear. Its erstwhile friend China, struggling to keep a grip on its restive regions, has expressed "concern". None of Russia's other friends—bar, belatedly, Belarus and Venezuela—has volunteered support. And while the Georgia adventure may have scared the neighbours, Russia's support for separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia risks emboldening its own would-be breakaway regions, notably in the north Caucasus.

Ordinary Russians will bear the cost. Russia's stockmarket has taken a knock and the costs of doing business there have shot up. Russian companies seeking to invest or list abroad ought now to face the closer scrutiny of their finances that earlier dodgy ones didn't, but should have. And Mr Medvedev's supposed plans for reform and strengthening the rule of law are in about the same shape as Georgia's beaten army.

But what Russia may come to regret losing most is something Mr Putin longs for: the opportunity to become an accepted European power. He likes to skip over communism's mistakes and dwell on Russia's tsarist grandeur. But what did for both was imperial overstretch, a rotten economy and, like Russia's today, a mostly unaccountable ruling caste that led a proud country to disaster. •