

LAST UPDATED: APRIL 21, 2008, 21:00 • TBILISI

---

## **Russian Fighter Violates Georgian Airspace, Downs Georgian Aircraft**

### **NATO-Standard Radar & On-Board Video Confirm Details of Confrontation; Attack Is Latest Russian Step in “Creeping Annexation” of Abkhazia**

---

On the morning of April 20, 2008, a Russian MIG 29 fighter aircraft blasted a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) from Georgian airspace. The unarmed Georgian UAV was conducting routine surveillance above the breakaway Georgian territory of Abkhazia. Radar tracking and video transmitted from the UAV in the moments before its destruction confirm the details of the attack. (Weblink to video footage at bottom.)\*

Georgian President Saakashvili said the downing of the Georgian drone, combined with Russia’s April 16 decision to establish legal links with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, constituted an “unprovoked aggression against the sovereign territory of Georgia.” He said the April 16 decision amounted to “legalizing the annexation of a large part of Georgia’s territory.”

Earlier today, Saakashvili spoke by phone with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. “I categorically demanded from him to immediately repeal the April 16 decision and to stop Russia’s attacks on Georgia,” he said.

The President, in a speech to the nation, called for unity and calm. He said that Georgia would respond to Russia’s aggression by redoubling its efforts to peacefully resolve the conflicts. “Georgia has a peace plan, an unprecedented peace plan, which is supported unanimously by the international community,” he said. “Georgia does not need unrest and hostilities. But we should tell the entire world that Georgia will never tolerate the seizure of our territories.”

#### **VIDEO & RADAR REVEAL DETAILS OF RUSSIA’S DOWNING OF THE GEORGIAN AIRCRAFT**

At 09:48 local time (GMT +4), Georgian radar detected the MIG 29 near the former Soviet military airfield at Gudauta, indicating that the attacking aircraft probably took off from there. Russia claims to have withdrawn its forces from Gudauta, leaving only a small contingent of peacekeepers, but it has consistently thwarted international efforts to confirm this withdrawal.

After gaining altitude east of the airfield, the MIG 29 turned south, roughly paralleling the Black Sea coast. Radar tracking reports correspond to the images from the UAV’s video camera. In the video, the fighter jet turns toward the UAV, approaches, and fires an air-to-air missile. At 09:54:31, the UAV transmission abruptly ended, indicating its destruction. The silhouette of the aircraft clearly shows the typical twin-tail arrangement of a MIG-29 “fulcrum” fighter jet, an aircraft neither the Abkhaz rebels nor the Georgian military possess.

According to the radar tracking data, the Russian fighter then turned north and fled into Russian airspace.

The Georgian radar that tracked the MIG 29, codenamed radar 36D, was recently upgraded to NATO standards. It is sited in the western region of Samegrelo abutting

---

\* The video from the attack can be found at

<http://www.police.ge/en/curview.aspx?newsid=31127&categoryid=1>

Abkhazia. This radar does not have simulation capability, meaning that it is incapable of producing tracking documentation indicating anything else but what the radar actually detected at the time of the incident.

### **ATTACK PART OF RUSSIAN GRAB AT GEORGIAN TERRITORY**

The Russian attack comes in the wake of Moscow's April 16 grab for the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On that day, outgoing Russian President Vladimir Putin issued an "Instruction" to his government to accelerate Moscow's annexation of the Georgian territories.

Putin directed the Russian Government, its ministries and Russian regions to open what he euphemistically calls "representations" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to protect the interests of Russian citizens living there and to foster cooperation on a wide range of subjects. These "representations" will be tantamount to the bureaucratic apparatus of autonomous republics of the Russian Federation.

Russia claims it is acting in the interest of its citizens in these regions. Most of those citizens are actually long-standing citizens of Georgia of Abkhaz and Ossete descent to whom Russia illegally distributed passports after the civil wars and ethnic cleansing that it sponsored during the nineties. These so-called "citizens" represent a small minority of those with a legal residence in the regions. Over 400,000 refugees and internally displaced persons, most scattered in free Georgia, are still hoping to return home one day.

The Russian Federation will henceforward recognize the legal acts, companies, and documents of the two breakaway regions, just as it recognizes those of its own subdivisions. In practice, it is incorporating Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Russian legal space.

### **RUSSIAN MOVE DRAWS SHARP INTERNATIONAL REBUKE**

The international community soundly rebuked Moscow's latest round of aggression against Georgia.

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer promptly issued a stiff response: "The Russian steps undermine Georgia's sovereignty. I urge the Russian Federation to reverse these measures."

The Slovenian presidency of the European Union said, "The EU considers that this decision risks further increasing tensions and undermines the international peace efforts where the Russian Federation participates too. The EU reiterates its firm commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders as reaffirmed in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1808 of 15 April 2008. The decision of the Russian Federation jeopardizes the implementation of these principles."

US State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack said, "We urge Russia to live up to its statements of support for the principles of Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity and to repeal the April 16 instructions."

"Such a move is in violation of international law," said John McCain, US Senator from Arizona and presidential candidate. "Russia is furthering its policy of de facto annexation that undermines security and stability in the region. Unfortunately, Russia's leaders have chosen a course of confrontation rather than cooperation."

US Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, also a presidential candidate, said, "Georgia is a small democratic state in a turbulent region. It must not be allowed to be undermined."

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt alluded to potential costs to Russia: "A political conflict in the immediate neighborhood of the future Winter Olympics is not in anyone's interest, least of all Russia's."

Moscow's aggressive use of its overwhelming air superiority is a salutary reminder that Russia, far stronger than Georgia, is seemingly happy to thumb its nose at the international community.

## **RUSSIA'S CREEPING ANNEXATION OF ABKHAZIA & SOUTH OSSETIA**

---

Moscow's most recent moves follow more than a decade of Russia's creeping annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russia maintains a near-total embargo on Georgia—no road, rail or sea links; no commerce, bank transactions or mail. The only exception is recently reestablished air travel between Tbilisi and Moscow. Then, this March, Russia withdrew from the 1996 Commonwealth of Independent States sanctions on Abkhazia, including those that barred the breakaway Georgian territory from receiving weapons and other forms of military assistance. Russia also gave Abkhazian contractors access to lucrative contracts associated with the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

The net effect is to include Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the Russian economic space while maintaining formidable barriers against trade with the rest of Georgia.

Essentially, the de facto authorities in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali are Russian subsidiaries. Many of their officials, particularly in the so-called power ministries, are Moscow-appointed Russian officers. As in Cold War Soviet satellite states, local politicians can maneuver, but Moscow remains in firm control.

### **THREAT OF FORCE**

---

The threat of Russian or Russian-backed force is never deeply submerged in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. That threat has been pronounced as tensions heightened over Western recognition of Kosovo's independence and as it became apparent that Georgia was taking concrete strides toward NATO.

Last November, for example, then Georgian State Minister for Conflict Resolution Davit Bakradze detailed that additional T-72 tanks, Grad multiple launch rocket systems, APCs, howitzers, and about 200 new Russian troops appeared in Abkhazia.

After Putin's April 16 gambit, Georgian State Minister for Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili said: "There has been a serious increase in the concentration of Abkhazian armed groups in the Gali district and the lower part of the Kodori Gorge."

The de facto authorities in Sukhumi contended that Tbilisi had deployed troops to Upper Abkhazia (also known as the Upper Kodori Gorge) and to the area around Zugdidi, capital of the western region of Mingrelia.

"Not a single unit of the Georgian armed forces is located either in Kodori Gorge, or in the Abkhaz vicinity," responded Georgian Defense Minister Davit Kezerashvili.

Nonetheless, the de facto authorities have used their claim as a pretext to move forces into the Gali district of western Abkhazia. Georgian residents of Gali report an influx of Abkhazian and Russian troops.

### **RUSSIAN FACT IS STRANGER THAN FICTION: A HISTORY OF BIZARRE ACTS**

---

Sadly, Russia's latest caper fits into a pattern of bizarre attacks followed by histrionic denials.

**Pankisi Gorge, August 23, 2002:** In Moscow's frenzy to conduct an incursion into Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, it conducted an air attack on several villages. One local citizen was killed and for more were wounded. "As far as I know," Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov brazenly said, "the Georgian military have started a special operation in this region to eliminate bandit groups." The attack, Moscow claimed, was made by American-trained Georgian ground forces.

**Upper Abkhazia, March 11, 2007:** Several Mil-24 helicopters entered Georgia from the Russian Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia. As the helicopters loitered above Upper Abkhazia, the villages of Chkhalt'a and Ajara came under attack by 9M22 ground-launched rockets, presumably from territory held by the de facto authorities in Abkhazia.

The attack culminated with a helicopter launch of an AT-9 Ataka anti-tank guided missile. The Ataka was reportedly of recent Russian manufacture—unlikely to have been in Abkhazian or Georgia hands—with a serial number that Russian authorities declined to trace.

Fortunately, the attack did not kill anyone. Russia, of course, denied any involvement, however, in the Caucasus region, only Russia is capable of flying helicopters across mountainous terrain at night.

**Tsitelubani, August 6, 2007:** A Russian Sukhoi-24 fighter dropped a Kh-58 anti-radar missile meters away from houses in the central Georgian village of Tsitelubani, just outside the South Ossetia Conflict Zone. On this occasion, the Russian aircraft was tracked by a Georgian radar—similar to the one that a few days ago tracked the Russian Su-27 in Abkhazia—and by Tbilisi air traffic control. The missile's apparent target was the radar itself, near Tsitelubani.

A team from the Joint Monitoring Group for South Ossetia—Russian, Georgian and North Ossetian peacekeepers plus a representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—hastened to the scene. "Based on parts extracted from the ground like missile engine, stabilizer-wings, electro-schemes and internal equipment," the team's written report says, "this is an air-to-surface guided missile, which did not explode after launch."

Moscow's first tale was that Georgia had concocted to bomb itself with aircraft and weapons that it does not possess! The evidence soon overwhelmed that claim, so Moscow switched tack, claiming there had never been any aircraft. Rather, Georgians had heaped the remains of a Russian bomb into the field.

Two teams of international experts, though they did not directly blame Russia, concluded that Georgian airspace was violated three times that day from Russian airspace, that one of the offending flights launched a Kh-58 missile and that Georgian aircraft had no capability to launch such a missile.

**Ganmukhuri, October 30, 2007:** After Moscow and the de facto authorities in Sukhumi bellyached for months about a teenagers' Patriots' Camp in the Georgian-administered village of Ganmukhuri, armored personnel carriers of the so-called Russian peacekeepers rolled up to the gates of the camp. Video taken by one of the Russian soldiers showed the peacekeeping troops capturing and beating some of the Georgian police officers assigned to guard the site. The incident came to a bizarre end when Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili—who had been at an event in nearby Zugdidi—arrived to upbraid the Russian commander and secure the release of the Georgian officers.

Despite the video that shows Georgian officers roused from behind the camp gate, the commander of Russian peacekeeping troops in Abkhazia said that they were arrested for threatening the Russians and that then, for two-and-a-half hours, the Georgian side refused to take them back.

## **WHAT IS HAPPENING?**

---

Moscow appears to mount these stunts when it wants to send a message of strength to Georgia and the international community. Moscow excels in bizarre behavior that can only be understood with willful suspension of disbelief—dioxin poisoning, assassination by irradiation and defenestration, mysterious gas pipeline explosions, etc. Wackiness is part of the plan—Moscow delivers its message, plausibly denying any involvement. Western countries receive the message, but the entire thing is so weird that they can plausibly deny having seen anything amiss.

Neglecting Moscow's antics has made things worse, not better. The attack on the UAV is not a single warning shot, but part of a Russian strategy in reaction to Western

recognition of Kosovo's independence and NATO's April 3 Bucharest Summit Declaration that Georgia will someday become an alliance member.

Moscow's first reaction to the Kosovo process, on March 6, was to withdraw unilaterally from the restrictions imposed by the CIS on Abkhazia, in place since 1996. Then came the March 21 Duma resolution, which urges the government to consider granting recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On April 3, in the middle of the NATO summit in Bucharest, President Putin communicated by letter to the de facto leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, expressing strong support for them, addressing them as "presidents" and promising Russian support that would be "practical, not declaratory" in nature.

On April 8, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov explicitly stated Russia would "do everything" to stop Georgia and Ukraine from acceding to NATO. These moves point to an intensification of Russia's already long-standing policy of creeping annexation of Georgia's separatist provinces. Most recently came Putin's April 16 Instruction.

The response of Western capitals and institutions was stiffer than Putin apparently imagined. The flight of the Su-27 was not only a reminder to Georgia of Russia's power, but a warning to the international community to back off.