

Georgia on my mind



LIKE MANY reasonable people, I was going to spend August 8th by a swimming pool in Sardinia, very civilised, Speedos and all.

I thought I was going to enjoy another relaxing day of glorious Mediterranean sunshine. How wrong I was. Well, at least about the relaxing bit.

When I woke up in the morning my mobile phone was full of text messages. A war had broke out in the Caucasus. Georgia and Southern Ossetia, and later Russia and Abkhazia would be involved.

I spent the rest of the day poolside talking to my colleagues around the world. The message was unanimous – something had to be done, and it had to be done fast.

Finland happens to hold the presidency of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This meant that we had to be involved on the ground.

Two days after the war had begun I flew over to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, together with my French colleague Bernard Kouchner, who holds the EU presidency. A ceasefire was negotiated within five days.

Seeing a war zone close-up is never a pretty sight. The visual memories of bombed buildings, bodies, refugees, soldiers and tanks are not easily erased.

A few weeks after the beginning of the conflict I have tried to come to terms

with what it all means. One thing is for sure – 080808 changed the world. How much? I really don't know.

For all of us European idealists the Cold War spelled the end of history. We thought that liberal democracy combined with a responsible market economy and the rule of law would dominate the future of world politics.

We started to talk about new threats, everything from terrorism to climate change. Traditional threats, such as armed conflicts, were supposed to be a thing of past, especially in Europe. The war in Georgia, however,

proves that old threats still exist.

The past years have also showed that market economy does not always go hand in hand with liberal democracy. Russia and China prove the case and point. Illiberal democracy can be combined with state capitalism.

The world might not have changed radically because of Georgia, but Europe did. Paradoxically the EU ended up with a more united policy on Russia. In addition, the conflict increased the momentum for a European foreign and security policy.

We used to be focused on the Western Balkans. Now the centre of gravity will shift to the East. The talk in town is all about the Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Had someone told me six months ago that Finland would be involved in brokering a ceasefire in the Caucasus I would have probably have laughed out loud. It just goes to show the unpredictability of world politics.

Next year I'll be looking forward to a more peaceful holiday. Perhaps I'll find a nice location by the Caspian Sea. ■■

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