

Russian interests and August 2008 War: An analysis

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Abstract:

The conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 marked the initial instance of Russia employing extensive military force against a former Soviet Union member. This was indeed an episode where Russia displayed its military might and power in order to warn the post-Soviet states of moving towards the West, a commitment that became more pronounced when it joined the United States-led coalition in the Iraq War in 2003. This trend escalated following the election of President Mikheil Saakashvili, who was pro-Western, in 2004. Russia's forceful response to the longstanding tensions with Georgia signalled the country's resurgence as a military power and set the stage for its contentious engagements with another former Soviet republic following the same pattern. Pro-Western orientation of the post-Soviet states brought a diversion in the relation between Russia and West. In the post-Cold War years there was a bonhomie between Russia and the West until the realization made by Russia of marginalization in partnership which was further triggered by the NATO and EU expansion in Eastern Europe and its traditional sphere of influence. This article examines the war between Russia and Georgia and delves into the Russian interest in this part of the world.

Keywords: South Ossetia, Russia, conflict, interest, Georgia

The post-Cold War narrative of Georgia revolves around the challenge of reclaiming a region where the inhabitants did not inherently align with Tbilisi. Following Russia's resistance to Zviad Gamsakhurdia's incursion into South Ossetia in 1992, the South Ossetians unofficially maintained a state of "status quo" independence. Despite a signed ceasefire, intermittent violence persisted without a conclusive, lasting resolution. Although Russia never formally recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as republics, Moscow supported both regions with peacekeeping forces. Tensions between Georgia and Russia escalated in 2007, fuelled by concerns about the Russian military's proximity and strained relations after Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, reaching a critical point in the spring of 2008 (Ellison, 2011: 346).

The examination of the war's context should take into account Moscow's role, considering several key aspects. Firstly, while Georgian forces initiated an attack on Tskhinvali before the Russian counter-offensive, both Moscow and Tbilisi bear responsibility for events that fuelled the crisis. Secondly, Moscow was concerned that successful colour revolutions like the Orange, Rose, and Tulip movements in other regions might inspire similar attempts in Russia. This apprehension is reflected in Moscow's policies aimed at maintaining regional strategic influence, often stemming from historical conflicts, as seen in Russian Dominance in the South

Caucasus, Crimea, and Central Eurasian regions. Thirdly, the increased presence of NATO forces and the potential establishment of US missile defense sites in Poland have been perceived by Russia as encroachment into its historical sphere of influence in Europe. Lastly, Russia's active engagement in global affairs is often attributed to its abundant resources in the energy sector, particularly wealth generated from transport rents paid by Europe for energy activities in the Caspian Sea. The emergence of alternative pipelines that bypass Russian territory, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the proposed Nabucco natural gas pipeline, has heightened Moscow's perception of Western infringement (Mankoff, 2009).

Putin's goal wasn't to revive the Soviet Union but rather to assert Russian influence in the former Soviet states. To achieve this, he needed to accomplish two key objectives. Firstly, he had to rebuild the reputation of the Russian military as a formidable force, especially within its own region. Secondly, he aimed to demonstrate that Western assurances, including NATO membership, held little value when confronted with Russian strength. While he didn't intend to directly challenge NATO, he did seek to take on and defeat a nation closely aligned with the United States, receiving U.S. support, assistance, and advisors, and widely perceived to be under American protection. Georgia emerged as the ideal candidate for this purpose.

Through its competent, if not brilliant, invasion of Georgia, Russia successfully restored the credibility of its military. However, the more significant outcome was Putin's revelation of a well-known but unspoken truth: American commitments lack value when the United States is heavily involved in the Middle East. This message is not intended for American audiences but rather for those from the Russian perspective, such as Ukrainians, Balts, and Central Asians. Putin aims to convey this lesson, and he also seeks to make Poland and the Czech Republic understand that the United States' desire to place ballistic missile defense systems in their countries poses a greater risk than enhancing their security.

The Russians are aware of a crucial factor: the Middle East, and especially Iran, holds greater significance for the United States than the Caucasus region, including Georgia. The U.S. wants Russian cooperation in imposing sanctions on Iran and, more importantly, it wants to prevent Russia from selling advanced weapons to Iran, particularly the highly effective S-300 air defense system. From the American perspective, Georgia is of lesser importance, whereas Iran is a central issue. The Russians have the potential to create significant challenges for the United States not only in Iran but also through arms sales to countries like Syria.

Consequently, the United States faces a dilemma. It must either shift its strategic focus away from the Middle East toward the Caucasus or exercise restraint in its response to the Georgian situation to avoid a Russian countermove in Iran. Even if the U.S. were inclined to engage in another conflict in Georgia at this time, it would need to consider the potential Russian reactions in Iran, and possibly in Afghanistan (despite current Moscow-Washington alignment in interests there).

The war in Georgia represents Russia's public reemergence as a major global power. This development is not spontaneous but has been unfolding gradually since Putin came into power, with increasing momentum in the past five years. It is a consequence of both Russia's growing strength and the United States' stretched and resource-depleted position due to its involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts. As we have previously discussed, this conflict provided a strategic opportunity that Russia aims to capitalize on to establish a new regional order while the United States is preoccupied elsewhere and reliant on Russian cooperation. The war wasn't a sudden event but rather the culmination of months of buildup, rooted in geopolitical dynamics that date back to 1992. Russia's historical imperial ambitions, spanning centuries, make the last 15 years or so appear as an anomaly that needed correction, and that correction is currently underway (Friedman, 2008).

To gain insight into Russian perspective of its strategic encirclement by the West, it's essential to consider two significant events. The first is the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. From the viewpoint of the United States and Europe, this event was seen as a triumph of democracy and Western influence. However, Russia viewed the Orange Revolution differently, asserting that it was a CIA-funded interference in Ukraine's internal affairs with the aim of pulling Ukraine into NATO and further encircling Russia. Russian leaders argued that U.S. Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton had previously assured Russia that NATO would not expand into the former Soviet Union territories.

This promise was already broken in 1998 with NATO's expansion into Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. The 2004 expansion went even further, including not only the remaining former Soviet satellite states in Central Europe but also the three Baltic states, which were once part of the Soviet Union.

The Russians had tolerated previous NATO expansions, but the discussion of including Ukraine in NATO was viewed as a severe threat to Russia's national security. It was seen as a move that could render Russia indefensible and potentially destabilize the Russian Federation itself. When the United States went further by suggesting the inclusion of Georgia in NATO, extending the alliance deeper into the Caucasus, Russia publicly stated that this represented a clear intention to encircle and weaken Russia.

The second, less significant event was the decision by Europe and the United States to support Kosovo's separation from Serbia. While Russia had friendly relations with Serbia, the deeper concern for Russia was the violation of the post-World War II European principle of maintaining national borders to prevent conflicts. Russia feared that if this principle was breached in Kosovo, it could set a precedent for other border changes, potentially including demands for independence from various regions within Russia. Russia both publicly and privately requested that Kosovo not be granted formal independence, but rather continue its informal autonomy, which, in practical terms, meant the same thing. However, these requests from Russia were disregarded.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has expressed that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical catastrophe. This statement doesn't imply a desire to resurrect the Soviet state, but rather highlights the fact that the Soviet Union's disintegration resulted in a situation where Russian national security faced threats from Western interests. The breakup of the Soviet Union left Russia in a position where it was surrounded by a set of nations with varying degrees of hostility toward Russian interests and significant influence from the United States, Europe, and in some instances, China (Friedman, 2008).

Claims of Revisionist tendencies:

Russian policy in Eurasia has exhibited revisionist tendencies since the Soviet Union's dissolution. Ethno-political conflicts, including those in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, have played a significant role in this regard. These conflicts undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the parent states affected, namely Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Russia is a central external actor and mediator in all peace processes, but its military presence and political involvement also position it as a participant in these conflicts. Since their emergence in the early 1990s, Moscow has used these conflicts as a means to exert influence over domestic and international developments in the affected states. While there is presently no imminent threat of Moscow intentionally escalating the four discussed unresolved conflicts, its targeted revisionist actions will persist and present a significant security concern in the region (Fischer, 2016: 9).

In his notable address to the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Vladimir Putin articulated his position asserting that the West, particularly the United States, should acknowledge the erosion and manipulation of international law. He highlighted concerns about the violation of fundamental principles like state sovereignty, which he believed undermined diplomacy and allowed for an unrestrained and excessive use of force. The Russian political leadership has held the conviction since the 1990s that international relations should be viewed as multipolar, contrary to the West's perception of a unipolar world. In this multipolar context, Russia seeks recognition as an autonomous power centre and demands equal treatment and respect for its interests from the United States and other Western entities. Russian politics is perceived as having the objective of opposing Western unilateralism by promoting a "democratic" international order and safeguarding international law against violations by Western powers. From this viewpoint, it is believed that the West, rather than Russia, is the driving force behind revisionist actions.

In Europe, Russia perceives itself as a stabilizing force. Moscow has consistently expressed dissatisfaction with the persistence of Cold War divisions in Europe, which it argues have not only endured but have also moved eastward, negatively affecting its interests. Emphasizing its status as a significant global power and historical hegemon in the post-Soviet region, Russia asserts itself as the "natural integration centre" for the

region. The expansion of Western influence is viewed as a direct challenge to Russia's "privileged interests." (Fischer, 2016, 10)

Critics argue that Western policy is considered revisionist because it alters global and regional power dynamics, posing challenges to both Russian interests and its traditional sphere of influence. While asserting its role as the predominant regional power, Russia simultaneously claims the right to influence the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighbouring countries. This is justified as a strategic move to counteract the expansion and reinforcement of the Western model and order. From this perspective, implementing revisionist policies toward its Eurasian neighbours is seen as a justified method for Russia to resist Western value-based revisionism.

The official Russian narrative remains rooted in the historical framework of the Soviet empire. While Russia may not be actively pursuing the re-establishment of a traditional, territorially defined empire, its primary approach to safeguarding its security largely involves exerting control over its neighbouring countries' domestic and foreign policies. The sovereignty of post-Soviet neighbouring states, which Russia initially accepted, has come under question since the mid-2000s, especially with the Kremlin's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

These differing historical references are key to understanding the mutual accusations of revisionism. Russia's discourse draws from the imperial Russian and Soviet past and implicitly challenges other post-Soviet states' right to internal and external sovereignty. In contrast, the Western discourse is based on the European system defined by the Charter of Paris, which upholds the sovereign right of all European states to freely and independently choose their alliances. In this context, the expansion of NATO and the EU in the 1990s and early 2000s is not considered revisionist, as it was initiated by the new member states and strained both organizations. Russian policy, however, restricts its neighbours' freedom in this regard and can be characterized as revisionist in the context of the Paris Charter, which Russia has not disavowed to this day (Fischer, 2016: 11).

Russian policies in Eurasia:

Russia's goal in Eurasia is to stabilize and expand its claimed regional sphere of influence, guided by three key aspects of policy. Firstly, Moscow aims for the economic and political integration of its post-Soviet neighbours. Despite numerous unsuccessful attempts since the 1990s to enhance cooperation and deepen integration in the region, Russian policy, particularly under Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012, has focused on the Eurasian Economic Union established in 2015. This union includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Russian Federation. Security collaboration among Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan occurs through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Secondly, Russia has employed “soft power” tools to broaden its influence in the region. This involves fostering connections with Russian and Russian-speaking communities beyond the borders of the Russian Federation through diverse channels. Its responsibilities encompass the promotion of Russian culture and language, safeguarding Russian historical heritage, providing support to Russians residing abroad, and reinforcing their connections to Russia.

Thirdly, Russian policy in Eurasia employs coercion, utilizing economic pressure—especially through crucial resources like energy—economic sanctions, and, to a growing extent, military force. These measures are applied against states attempting to resist Russia’s endeavours for influence and integration.

Russia’s approach to establishing a sphere of influence traces back to the 1990s. Initially, the Russian state lacked the strength to consistently pursue a policy for its “near abroad.” The situation underwent a shift in the early 2000s as Russia achieved economic and political stability.

The more assertive stance adopted by Moscow toward its neighbours also stemmed from a fundamental change in the security perception of the Russian political elite. In the 1990s, instability in the neighbouring regions was considered the primary source of security risks, with unresolved conflicts playing a significant role. During this period, Russian policy aimed at containing escalation risks and securing influence. However, starting from the early 2000s, the increasing influence of Western actors in the region took centre stage in Russian perception as the primary security threat. Competition with these Western actors became the central theme of Russian policy. Moscow began leveraging its neighbours’ vulnerabilities to counter Western influence, and the existing unresolved conflicts became one aspect of this strategic development.

In the 1990s, Russia viewed instability in neighbouring post-Soviet states as a significant and perilous threat to its already weakened state. Moscow was concerned that these conflicts could potentially escalate beyond local boundaries, leading, for instance, to a direct destabilizing impact in the Russian North Caucasus, as seen in the case of Abkhazia. Despite using the conflicts to exert targeted pressure on neighbouring states at this point, Russia’s overall policy aimed at bringing an end to the wars and stabilizing the situations along its borders.

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War marked a significant shift towards the militarization of Russian policy in its Eurasian vicinity. Despite the conflict initiating with a Georgian attack on Tskhinvali, Russia had been preparing for such a scenario by concentrating forces along its southern border and conducting regular exercises in the years leading up to the war. Following the conflict, Russia established regular military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia through formal alliances with these entities. In 2015, it was estimated that around seven thousand Russian soldiers were stationed in these regions.

Cooperation with the UN and OSCE was severed, leading to the cessation of their operations due to the failure to agree on extending their mandates. Since then, there has been no international observation of Russia's military activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The subpar performance of the Russian army in the Russo-Georgian War prompted a comprehensive overhaul of the armed forces. Post-2008 reforms focused on professionalizing personnel, enhancing command and leadership structures, and modernizing weapons systems and technical equipment across all branches.

Strategically, the armed forces maintained a primary focus on power projection in the neighbourhood and adjacent regions (Middle East, Asia) and on defense against potential threats from the West. Exercises and technical improvements were implemented to enhance troop mobility and special forces capabilities. New capacities for hybrid warfare were developed and refined. Bases in eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia played a crucial role in enabling Russian forces to deploy rapidly in the vicinity (Fischer, 2016: 15- 16).

Russia played a supportive role in establishing state structures in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia on two main levels. Firstly, it strengthened the separatists militarily, deployed peacekeeping forces, and played a central role in peace processes, often aiming to bolster the secessionist entities against their parent states. Therefore, Russia's position as a security guarantor created the external conditions for the formation of state structures in the contested territories. Secondly, Russia provided varying degrees of economic and financial assistance, along with political support, for the establishment of these structures. As early as the 1990s, Russian actors with nationalist leanings advocated for an active policy of reinforcing the secessionist entities and forging closer ties with Russia.

In Transnistria and South Ossetia, the aspiration for independence is closely linked to a desire for reunification with Russia. The Russian or Russian-speaking populations in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR) maintain strong connections with Russia, and the Ossetians in South Ossetia identify with the Republic of North Ossetia in the Russian North Caucasus. Both Transnistria and South Ossetia have embraced the Russian political model with the goal of integrating into the Russian Federation. However, Russia has so far resisted these overtures.

The complex geographical situation of Transnistria makes annexation, following the Crimean model, costly and risky for Russia. Additionally, the Kremlin has not directly responded to Tskhinvali's request for incorporation, despite the shared border and close ties between South and North Ossetia that could favour such a move. Granting the demands of South Ossetia and Transnistria could lead to the loss of a crucial lever of influence over Moldova and Georgia for Moscow (Fischer, 2016: 18).

An analytical overview of the Crisis:

The roots of the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia extend well before the secessionist wars of the early 1990s. The integration of Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia into tsarist Russia was marked by conflict, as was their subsequent incorporation into the ethnicity-based federal structure of the Soviet Union. Throughout the Soviet period, tensions persisted over issues of autonomy and status. In particular, Abkhazia witnessed protest movements advocating for increased political and cultural independence from Tbilisi at various points. The Georgian elites, in response, protested against Russian dominance. During conflicts with Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia sought support from Moscow, which strategically played all three parties against each other. Consequently, Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia became intricately entangled in a web of discriminatory structures where they simultaneously played the roles of victim and perpetrator.

The Rose Revolution and Mikheil Saakashvili's rise to power brought dynamism to Georgian politics. The new leadership linked domestic political and economic reforms to a foreign policy aimed at Euro Atlantic integration and the swift reunification of Georgia. The approach toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia alternated between offers to find common ground and harsh nationalist rhetoric. Initially, the rapid restoration of Tbilisi's control over Adjara in 2004 seemed to validate this course.

Georgian leaders sought to internationalize the conflicts by labelling Russia as the main adversary and denouncing the political leaderships in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali as criminal shadow regimes and Moscow's puppets. Simultaneously, Tbilisi intensified cooperation with the United States, NATO, and the European Union, aiming to enhance their influence in the peace processes and strengthen its own position against Moscow. Russia vehemently opposed Saakashvili's Euro Atlantic ambitions, particularly Georgia's aspiration to join NATO. The period leading up to 2008 witnessed growing polarization and confrontation at various levels, along with peace initiatives from the conflict parties, the OSCE, and the UN.

Until 2008, the political situation in South Ossetia was tense but relatively open, with a mixed settlement structure. The region had yet to recover from the economic fallout of the early 1990s war. Unresolved questions about South Ossetian infrastructure and the border crossing to Russia hindered trade, fostering conditions for smuggling and black-market activities, which became the primary source of income (Fischer, 2016: 47).

Following 1994, Abkhazia experienced almost complete isolation. In addition to Georgia's economic blockade, the CIS imposed an embargo in 1996. Russia supported this embargo in exchange for Georgia's cooperation in dealing with Chechen separatists who had sought refuge in Georgian territory. Throughout the 1990s, the Abkhaz economy relied solely on remittances from Abkhaz individuals residing in Russia, with additional support from Russian aid and informal economic relations, including smuggling with Russia and Turkey. The extensive war damage in Abkhazia persisted until well into the 2000s, leading to stagnation in agriculture and tourism.

Improvements began in the early 2000s as Russia gradually eased its policy of isolation. Moscow allowed increased trade between Abkhazia and adjacent Russian areas. Simultaneously, the Russian authorities began issuing passports to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Consequently, the informal dependence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia grew steadily from the early 2000s until the Russo-Georgian War of 2008.

The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 represented a turning point for both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It marked the culmination of a prolonged period of escalating tensions not only between the conflicting parties but also in the relations between Georgia and Russia, and between Russia and Western entities such as the United States, NATO, and the European Union.

By officially recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, Russia openly deviated for the first time from its commitment to the existing post-Soviet borders. In the fall of 2008, Moscow entered into “agreements on friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance” with both entities, providing substantial budget assistance in the subsequent years and investing in the socio-economic development of the secessionist territories. Russian state funds largely finance pensions and other social benefits, as well as nearly 100 percent of “foreign investment.” With assistance from Russia, health and education services in the secessionist territories were partially restored.

Under the framework of “defense alliances,” Moscow deployed regular forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and aided Sukhumi and Tskhinvali in securing their “borders” with Georgia.

The war and Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia further isolated both regions from Georgia and the international community. This was particularly significant in the South Ossetia conflict, given its previously permeable borders. The events of 2008 also reshaped the perceptions of the parties involved. In Georgia, they solidified the image of Russia as an aggressor, intensifying the sense of threat and insecurity. Under the official patronage of Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for the first time, felt secure from Georgian aggression.

The aftermath of the war accelerated the divergence of societies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia even more rapidly than in the years preceding 2008. The realities for the generations growing up in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are heavily shaped by isolation.

While the 2008 war amplified existing trends in the secessionist territories’ relationships with Russia and Georgia, it created fundamentally new dynamics at the international level. Following Moscow’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia and the West could no longer reach a consensus on the status and mandates for the missions of the UN and the OSCE. Consequently, with the closure of these missions, the non-

Russian international presence vanished from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In their place, Moscow established regular military bases in both regions, replacing the previous peacekeeping forces (Fischer, 2016: 48-49).

The crisis in Ukraine has added complexity to the Georgian coalition government's pursuit of foreign policy and conflict objectives. Despite some normalization of relations with Russia, the northern neighbour is still perceived as a threat, especially since the crisis has strengthened Euro-Atlantic ambitions in Tbilisi. NATO membership remains a primary objective of Georgian foreign policy alongside association with the European Union. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have become more closely intertwined with Russia since 2014. South Ossetia desires unification with Russia, which Moscow is presently unwilling to grant. The change is more evident in Abkhazia, where scepticism toward complete Russian takeover persists.

The change of government in Sukhumi puts Moscow in a better position to assert its interests. Abkhazia's political and economic dependence on Russia limits the manoeuvring room for both state and non-state actors, putting pressure on parts of the opposition and civil society advocating for greater independence from Russia and increased engagement with Georgia and the international community.

Since 2014, Moscow has significantly increased its influence in both entities. Bringing Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's political, economic, and military integration close to annexation was seen as a symbolic response to Georgia's EU association process. This move primarily secures Moscow's political control in the territories and a strategic foothold in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region. However, despite explicit wishes from South Ossetia for accession, the Kremlin has shown little willingness to advance integration further. A possible annexation of South Ossetia involves domestic political risks for the Russian leadership, considering the growing anti-Caucasian sentiment in Russian society.

Russia continues to cooperate in the Geneva Discussions, emphasizing its commitment to not jeopardizing the normalization process with Georgia. More importantly, as seen in the case of Crimea, annexing Abkhazia and South Ossetia would mean relinquishing a leverage of influence that could still be useful in Moscow's relationship with Tbilisi, depending on how Georgian domestic and foreign policy evolve. For this reason, Moscow is likely to remain ambivalent while constraining options, especially for Abkhazia.

Moscow's aggression against Kiev was perceived as a continuation of its policy in the Georgian secession conflicts, raising concerns that Russia might expedite the "creeping annexation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Consequently, Georgia intensified its efforts for Euro-Atlantic integration amid the crisis. This involved implementing the Association Agreement with the EU and strengthening cooperation with NATO. In 2014, NATO and Georgia established a Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, encompassing a new military training centre and NATO exercises within Georgia.

Although Georgia's pursuit of a Membership Action Plan (MAP) before the July 2016 NATO summit did not succeed, Tbilisi and the Alliance agreed on various measures to enhance their cooperation. Georgia is diligently working to fulfil the provisions of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the European Union. Progress in negotiations with the EU on visa-free travel is substantial and expected to be completed in 2016. Tbilisi also joined the EU sanctions against the annexation of Crimea, albeit not adopting more far-reaching financial and sectoral economic sanctions unlike the Georgian Dream coalition, which assumed power in 2012, aimed to normalize Georgia's relations with Russia (Fischer, 2016: 48-50).

The August war had a contradictory impact on the Caucasus, transforming the region into the primary stage for the most significant international crisis in recent history. Russian-American relations had not encountered such a critical juncture since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, prompting comparisons to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 by some observers.

In August 2008, Russian-Georgian relations reached their lowest point in history. While one might expect gradual normalization after hitting rock bottom, a year later, the reopening of embassies appears distant. This isn't solely due to Russian President Medvedev expressing an unwillingness to engage in discussions with the current Georgian leader. The unfavourable personal compatibility between the Russian and Georgian leadership, which was a significant factor before last August, has now taken a backseat, if not faded into obscurity. Neither side has demonstrated the willingness to overcome the consequences of the conflict, and their foreign policy agendas are fundamentally incompatible. The heightened trends in Russian-Georgian relations that emerged even before August persist, and the crisis did not resolve these underlying contradictions.

The Roki tunnel, connecting South Ossetia to Russia, has traditionally been a vital source of livelihood for the region's residents, primarily through cross-border trade, often involving smuggling. The main hub for this trade was the market in the Georgian village of Ergneti, located on the southern outskirts of Tskhinvali. However, in the summer of 2004, Georgian authorities closed this market. While it has proven challenging to completely eradicate cross-border trade (some roads in South Ossetia bypass Georgian police posts), the trade suffered a significant setback, negatively impacting the economic potential of the republic.

Between 2004 and 2008, the South Ossetian leadership struggled to establish alternative economic mechanisms. The absence of such mechanisms was compensated for by aid from Russia, the exact amount of which before the war was not disclosed, and it was provided through the North Ossetian budget (Silaev, 2009: 9).

Currently, cross-border trade has come to a halt. The sole prospect for economic revival in the republic seems to be the restoration program, for which Moscow intends to allocate 10 billion rubles. This funding could potentially lead to economic recovery if used judiciously with the involvement of local production. It could

address some of the demand for construction materials and contribute to a resurgence in South Ossetia's construction industry. However, it is likely that construction contracts will be decided in Moscow, shaping the restoration plans. There is no assurance that the leadership of the republic will possess enough lobbying power or administrative expertise to ensure that a portion of the funds from the restored budget is invested in production within South Ossetia. Additionally, though 1.5 billion rubles of the planned 10 billion have already been transferred, there have been no indications of its recuperative impact on the republic's economy.

Around midnight on August 8, a procession of several hundred Russian tanks traversed the Roki Tunnel, linking Russia to the breakaway province of South Ossetia in Georgia. This marked Russia's initial military incursion into another state since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, making it a momentous event with implications reaching beyond the South Caucasus. While the humanitarian repercussions of the ensuing war in Georgia may not parallel those of conflicts like Chechnya or Bosnia in the 1990s, the dispute arguably posed the most substantial challenge to Europe's security framework since the conclusion of the Cold War.

In recent times, the countries of the South Caucasus have experienced notable advancements, showcasing some of the most impressive progress observed in the post-Soviet landscape. This stands in stark contrast to the initial decade of their independence in the 1990s, marked by debilitating ethnic conflicts, political instability, and economic downturn that left the region in disarray. During that period, Armenia and Azerbaijan engaged in a brutal war, while Georgia faced internal strife as two northern autonomous regions effectively seceded with assistance from Russia. Subsequently, these conflicts remained unresolved, and the Western world largely overlooked them, despite the inherent risks.

Among the three South Caucasus nations, Georgia has undergone the most remarkable transformation. At the beginning of the current decade, the central government, under the control of the aging former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, struggled to exert genuine authority beyond the immediate vicinity of the capital, and the nation was labelled as a failing state. However, in 2003, the "young reformers" nurtured by Shevardnadze became an opposition force and orchestrated the peaceful "Rose Revolution." Under the leadership of President Mikheil Saakashvili, the government initiated sweeping reforms with an enthusiasm for change unprecedented in the former Soviet Union, excluding the Baltic States. The administration successfully eradicated petty corruption, discarded Soviet-era practices while overhauling institutions, and reconstructed the tax system. This transformative effort resulted in a quadrupling of Georgia's budget, restoring the country's solvency.

However, Georgia's newfound successes sparked discontent within the country. The charismatic Saakashvili-led government at times displayed arrogance and a lack of sensitivity to the adverse impacts of its policies. In

November 2007, street protests organized by opposition groups funded by a questionable oligarch, followed by a subsequent crackdown, undermined the government's legitimacy. Despite this crisis, the government managed to survive. Much of the lost legitimacy was restored when early elections were conducted and deemed mostly free and fair by international observers. Saakashvili was re-elected with 52 percent of the vote, more than double the share of his closest opponent, and the ruling party-maintained control in parliamentary elections. While Georgia still faces challenges in terms of building institutions, establishing the rule of law, and fostering a fully democratic political culture, it is challenging to find a country anywhere that has undergone such a rapid transformation in the past decade (Cornell, 2008: 307-308).

Certainly, Baku and Tbilisi emerged as anti-status quo powers, challenging the effectiveness of international conflict resolution mechanisms and allocating a significant portion of their growing national wealth to military budgets. This has led to the recent confusion among European powers, who, despite having numerous other concerns, found themselves compelled to address conflicts in a distant neighbourhood they understood poorly. Above all, it clarifies Russia's increasingly assertive involvement in these conflicts, particularly those in Georgia.

Upon assuming power in Georgia in early 2004, Saakashvili swiftly raised the Council of Europe's flag alongside Georgia's in front of the national parliament. Significantly, the Council of Europe's flag is identical to that of the European Union—featuring 12 stars on a deep blue background—thus, hoisting it served as a potent expression of Georgia's European aspirations. Shortly thereafter, Saakashvili announced Georgia's intent to pursue NATO membership.

No longer reliant on Western loans, Russia was experiencing a surge in oil revenue and was actively engaged in a self-promotion campaign to reestablish its status as a major global power. Vladimir Putin, the country's president, was resolute in reversing the impact of the "color revolutions" that had ushered in pro-Western leaders in Tbilisi and Kiev, putting Georgia and Ukraine on a path toward NATO membership. Putin perceived these developments as a consequence of Moscow's vulnerability in the 1990s, and he believed that demonstrations of Russian strength were necessary. Nowhere has Moscow's willingness to showcase its power been more evident than in Georgia.

From Moscow's perspective, Georgia's confidence and achievements posed the primary regional challenges to the emerging "Putin doctrine," which aimed at Russia reclaiming dominance and control over the former Soviet Union states. The Kremlin perceived Georgia's revolution as a catalyst for the Ukrainian revolution the following year, potentially sparking a series of democratic uprisings that could bring Western-oriented leaders to power across the post-Soviet world. Such a scenario would clearly impede Putin's aspirations to revive Moscow's empire and eventually pose a threat to the authority of the authoritarian kleptocracy in the Kremlin.

The success of Russia in its aspirations, both in terms of establishing dominance over Georgia, the South Caucasus, and the wider post-Soviet region, and in terms of reshaping European security, hinges significantly on the West's capacity to respond effectively to the challenge. Regrettably, the initial reaction of the West in the weeks following the invasion was disheartening, with Western leaders appearing surprised by the events and struggling to identify effective measures to address them.

Moscow's invasion of its southern neighbour is a demonstration of power, but not necessarily an indicator of strength. Instead, it reveals certain weaknesses in Russia's approach. Firstly, the invasion highlights that Moscow was unable to achieve its political objectives in the South Caucasus without resorting to war, undermining Western perceptions of Russia. Secondly, the timing of Russia's first foreign military action since 1979 during a period of political uncertainty, with both Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev in office, may not be coincidental. Russia's historical military engagements in its borderlands have often been linked to domestic political considerations, as seen in the case of the 1999 war in Chechnya, which contributed to Putin's rise to power (Cornell, 2008: 313-314).

Moscow responded to Georgia's actions in a measured but assertive manner, utilizing a set of measures not previously applied to any other former Soviet state. Initially, Russia undermined Georgia's statehood and independence by taking a more direct role in the unresolved civil conflicts that Moscow had played a part in initiating. Even before Saakashvili assumed power, Russia had imposed a discriminatory visa policy on Georgia, requiring visas for Georgians but exempting residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Subsequently, Moscow began mass distribution of Russian passports to the populations of these two regions, a move that violated international law.

Subsequently, Russia asserted its right to defend its citizens abroad, even through military means if deemed necessary. This claim served as the pretext for Russia's invasion of Georgia. Additionally, Moscow vehemently opposed any attempts to internationalize mediation, negotiation, and peacekeeping in the conflict zone.

Moscow's strategic interests:

Russia's invasion of Georgia was driven by larger and strategic objectives that extended well beyond the confines of South Ossetia. Concerning Georgia, the invasion aimed to punish President Saakashvili's government for its Western alignment and its steadfast resistance to Russian influence. The Kremlin likely aspired to bring about the downfall of a President who was intensely disliked by Putin. While this goal was not immediately achieved, Moscow did succeed in severely weakening Georgia's military capabilities and causing

substantial damage to the country's economy and infrastructure. The conflict proved disastrous for an economy heavily reliant on increasing Western investments.

Moscow's rejection of withdrawing from Georgia, coupled with the creation of occupation zones well within Georgian borders, poses a significant threat to vital transportation routes. These actions strongly suggest that the invasion's primary objective was to undermine Georgia's independence, transforming it into a compliant satellite state. Additionally, the war clearly aimed to thwart Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, taking advantage of the belief that European nations would be hesitant to incorporate a country partially under Russian occupation.

At the regional level, the conflict aimed to reinstate Moscow's dominance over the strategically vital South Caucasus. This area holds significant geopolitical importance due to its unique position between Russia and Iran, serving as a crucial link between the Black and Caspian seas. The Caucasian isthmus acts as a key access route connecting the West to Central Asia, facilitating the transportation of Caspian oil to Western regions and providing NATO with a logistical connection from Europe to its operations in Afghanistan. Notably, the conflict indirectly sought to impact not only Georgia's independence but also posed a threat to Azerbaijan's autonomy.

Despite Azerbaijan's efforts to maintain diplomatic ties with both Moscow and Tehran, it is evident that the country's economic and strategic focus has leaned towards the West. The close relationship between Azerbaijan and Georgia is so intertwined that they are often considered a tandem, mutually dependent on each other's well-being. Azerbaijan, being rich in oil, relies on Georgia as a gateway to the West for its oil exports and to maintain its connection with Turkey, a key ally. Simultaneously, Georgia's strategic significance diminishes without Azerbaijan. The limited and subdued Western response to Russia's invasion of Georgia puts Azerbaijan in a difficult position. While Moscow's actions contradict Baku's efforts of the past decade, Azerbaijan is hesitant to express strong opposition, fearing potential repercussions from Moscow.

Apart from Georgia itself, the primary concern for Moscow during the invasion was likely Ukraine. Similar to Georgia, Ukraine is a candidate for NATO membership, but Russian elites view Ukraine as an integral part of Russia's history rather than a distinct nation. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Putin even cautioned then-US President George W. Bush that Ukraine joining NATO could lead to its disintegration. Furthermore, since the spring of the same year, Russia has been asserting more forceful claims to the Crimean Peninsula, which happens to host Russia's Black Sea fleet. Analogous to its actions in Georgia's breakaway regions, Russia has initiated extensive distribution of Russian passports to Crimea residents, many of whom are ethnic Russians.

Russia's aggression against Georgia conveyed a clear message to the West: The South Caucasus and the entire former Soviet Union fall within Moscow's exclusive sphere of influence, urging the West to refrain from interference. This signifies Russia's intent to establish a Cold War-era style division of Europe into spheres of influence. It presents the most significant challenge to European security norms and principles since the end of the Cold War. If Russia succeeds in its objectives, Europe could witness the denial of sovereign rights to entire nations, subjecting them to Russian control irrespective of their national interests. The prospect of maintaining democracy in areas under Russian dominance appears bleak, as Russia, lacking attractiveness as a force, resorts to intimidation to exert control over its neighbours, reminiscent of the Soviet era (Cornell, 2008: 312-313).

By establishing a military presence and conferring Russian citizenship to the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Moscow effectively solidified its control over these unrecognized republics even before officially recognizing their independence in 2008. The deployment of military forces and the issuance of Russian passports served as means for Moscow to legitimize its presence in the breakaway regions of Georgia. This paved the way for the application of the "responsibility to protect" principle, notably evident in the South Ossetia War of August 2008.

Due to a significant number of Russian citizens residing in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by 2008, Moscow policymakers advocated for Russia's sovereign right to directly involve itself in the conflict that it was intentionally escalating. This strategic move aimed to exploit the instrument of passportization as a crucial factor, allowing Moscow to utilize the United Nations-approved concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Moscow asserted that its military intervention into the de facto states and subsequently into Georgia was justified by disruptions to the role of Russian peacekeepers caused by a Georgian offensive, posing an existential threat to Russian citizens on the ground. The core rationale for Moscow's intervention in Georgia was its commitment to "protect Russia's citizens" wherever they resided, likened to an event referred to as 'Russia's 9/11' (Allison, 2008). Hence, the international norm of Responsibility to Protect became an operational mechanism intertwined with Russia's regional interests, effectively utilizing the passportization of populations in the de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Conclusion:

The presence of unrecognized or de facto states in the South Caucasus has allowed Moscow to exert and expand its influence in the region, particularly in adopting a more assertive stance towards Georgia. This elucidates Moscow's interest in obstructing a lasting resolution to the regional 'frozen conflicts' while sustaining the economic and political viability of these unrecognized states. Although the article's findings are primarily

based on context-specific observations, they hold broader relevance by highlighting the strategic use of unrecognized states as a tool for practicing power politics (Souleimanov et. al., 2018: 16).

In this context, a statement made by Vladimir Putin regarding the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union provides valuable context, shedding light on the fundamental motivation behind Russia's increasingly assertive stance in unrecognized states. Referring to the dissolution of the Soviet Empire as the 'geopolitical catastrophe of the century,' Putin expressed that it was a genuine tragedy for the Russian people, as tens of millions of their fellow citizens ended up outside the borders of Russian territory (Putin, 2015).

The deployment of the Russian military in Abkhazia and South Ossetia played a crucial role in manipulating the de facto states in these separated regions of Georgia. This tactic was employed to maintain Georgia's susceptibility in its dealings with Moscow and to dismantle the restructured Georgian army (Aliyev, 2014). The objective was to render NATO membership unattainable for Georgia and destabilize the overall governance of the Georgian state.

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