

August 2008 and Everything After

A Ten-Year Retrospective on
the Russia-Georgia War

Robert E. Hamilton





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AUGUST 2008 AND EVERYTHING AFTER:

A Ten-Year Retrospective on the Russia-Georgia War

By: **Robert E. Hamilton**

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Executive Summary

The 2008 war between Russia and Georgia shocked most of the world but was quickly overshadowed by other events. The 2008 financial crisis, which began around the same time, seized the attention of governments as they tried to prevent a global economic meltdown. Barack Obama's election to the U.S. presidency in November of that year ushered in a "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations, and the U.S. began looking for pragmatic ways to cooperate with Russia. Even Georgia seemed to move on from the war quickly: its political and economic reform processes continued and even accelerated in the years after the war. But the ten years since the war have brought more ominous consequences into view. The continued presence of thousands of Russian troops inside Georgia's borders have degraded its always-tenuous security situation and taken a psychological toll on its people. And Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine have made clear that - far from being an isolated event - Russia's 2008 intervention in Georgia marked the beginning of a sustained and serious Russian challenge to the U.S.-led global order.

“The Little War”

As world leaders gathered in Beijing for the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics, a different and far more serious contest erupted some 3700 miles away, in the Republic of Georgia. Late on the night of August 7, Georgian troops entered South Ossetia, a breakaway region of the country where violence had been escalating for months. After brushing aside local militias and fighting their way through the capital of Tskhinvali, Georgian forces were stunned to find themselves fighting Russian Army troops, which had been quietly moving into the region for several days. When the war ended five days later, Russia had ejected the Georgian military from South Ossetia and Abkhazia - Georgia's other separatist region - and was within striking distance of the capital of Tbilisi. Georgia's armed forces were seriously damaged and its government was in disarray, Russia found itself diplomatically isolated, and NATO, which had recently promised to admit Georgia as a member, now had to consider whether doing so would invite war with Russia. The short, sharp war between Russia and Georgia shocked world leaders, many of whom assumed that interstate war on the borders of an expanding Europe was a thing of the past.

But the world quickly moved on. The late Ron Asmus, author of one of the first histories of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, initially titled his book *A Little War That Changed the World*. By the time of its publication in 2010, Asmus had changed the title to *A Little War That Shook the World*, concluding that although the war had come as a shock to many Western policymakers, it really hadn't changed much. Asmus had reason to be skeptical about the war's enduring effects. Less

than seven months after the war, new U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov a “reset” button, meant to signify a new, more cooperative stage in U.S.-Russian relations. By 2010, the reset was hitting its stride—the U.S. and Russia had signed a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) that April, Russia began playing a more helpful role in the U.S. effort to resupply its forces in Afghanistan, and it put increasing pressure on Iran, including cancelling the planned sale of S-300 missiles to Tehran. In late 2011, Russia was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO), after U.S. pressure convinced Georgia to drop its veto of Russian membership.

By then, however, there were already signs that the U.S.-Russia relationship was once again fraying. The September 2011 announcement by Dmitri Medvedev, then-President of the Russian Federation, and Vladimir Putin, then-Prime Minister, that they would switch places for the 2012 Russian presidential elections set off a sustained bout of popular protests in major Russian cities. U.S. expressions of support for the protests and “serious concerns” about the fairness of the December 2011 Duma elections and the March 2012 presidential elections further strained ties. Vladimir Putin accused the U.S.—and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton personally—of fomenting the protests and attempting to destabilize Russia.¹

¹ Kathy Lally and Karen DeYoung, “Putin Accuses Clinton, U.S. of Fomenting Election Protests,” *Washington Post*, December 8, 2011. Internet resource at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/putin-accuses-clinton-us-of-stirring-election-protests/2011/12/08/gIQA0MUDfO_story.html?utm_term=.88b6664b5c74, accessed July 25, 2018.



The NATO-led intervention in Libya the same year, which ended with Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi being executed by rebels, also infuriated Putin. In a “ferocious verbal tirade” on state television, Putin alleged that U.S. drones attacked Gaddafi’s motorcade and then U.S. Special Forces brought in the opposition fighters who “killed him without court or investigation.” In the same speech, Putin re-addressed the election protests, calling protestors “pawns in the hands of foreign agents.”² By early 2014, things deteriorated from bad to worse. Russia’s seizure of Crimea and instigation of war in eastern Ukraine threw its relationship with the West into a crisis that persists today. Despite U.S. President Donald Trump’s evident affinity for Putin, the bilateral

relationship remains mired in mistrust and recrimination.

This paper examines the ten years since the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, asking what enduring effect, if any, the war had on the belligerents and their partners. It examines Georgia’s political, military, economic, and social development in this period, including Georgia’s relationships with Russia and with its separatist regions that were the object of the 2008 war. Next, the paper examines the trajectory of the West’s relationships with Russia and Georgia since the war. It concludes by attempting to determine whether the war had any independent effect in these areas, or whether it simply represented another of the periodic crises that have engulfed Georgia and have erupted in Russia’s relationship with the West since the end of the Cold War. Finally, the paper offers suggestions for future policies to negotiate the complex terrain framing interaction among Georgia, Russia, and the West.

² Andrew Osborn, “Vladimir Putin lashes out at America for killing Gaddafi and backing protests,” *Telegraph*, December 15, 2011. Internet resource at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/8958475/Vladimir-Putin-lashes-out-at-America-for-killing-Gaddafi-and-backing-protests.html>, accessed July 25, 2018.

Consequences for Georgia

Zurab Abashidze, Georgia's Special Representative for Relations with the Russian Federation, notes that the immediate consequences of the war for Georgia were disastrous. These include the occupation of 20% of its territory, the return of Russian military bases to Georgian soil, the presence of Russian military forces 30km from Tbilisi, the destruction of much of Georgia's military and civilian infrastructure, and the ejection of the international presence in the conflict management process.³

Over the longer term, the war's impact on Georgia is less clear. Certainly, Georgia's present security situation is tenuous. But it was also tenuous before the war and has been so since the country gained independence. The separatist wars that broke out in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the early 1990s, coupled with an internal war between Georgian political factions, had the Georgian state teetering on the edge of collapse. The early 2000s brought improvements in Georgia's political, military, economic, and social circumstances. The 2008 war disrupted these developments, but, in some areas, Georgia bounced back quickly. This section of the paper reviews political, military, economic, and social-psychological developments in Georgia since the war, and attempts to determine whether—and if so, how—the war affected these.

Political Developments

Georgia's democratization accelerated with the 2003 Rose Revolution, which

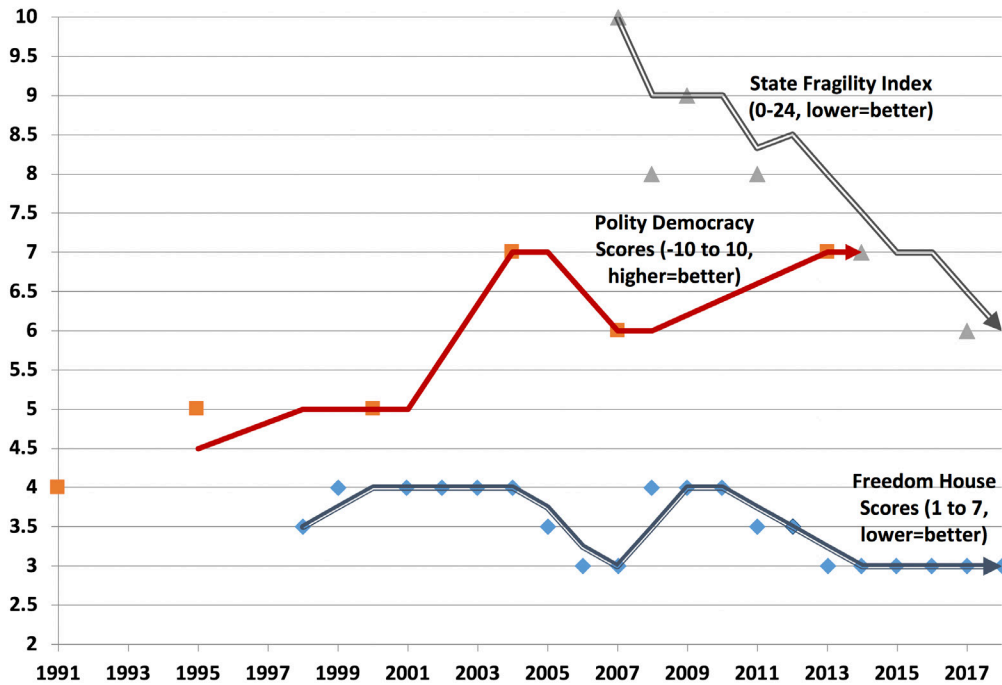
brought Mikhail Saakashvili's reformist United National Movement to power. As the chart below makes clear, Georgia's Polity Project democracy scores ticked up with the election of Saakashvili's government, but then began eroding in 2007, with the consolidation of authority by Saakashvili and the suppression of opposition demonstrations in November of that year. Georgia's democracy scores stabilized at that lower level for six years, and then rose slightly as Georgians elected a new government in their first constitutional transfer of power in the post-Soviet period. Georgia's democracy score remains at that level today.

“The war appeared to play a more direct role in increasing the fragility of the Georgian state than eroding the quality of Georgian democracy.”

Freedom House, which tracks political rights and civil liberties around the world, tells a similar story: Georgians gained more political and civil rights after the Rose Revolution, those rights went into decline in 2007, but have since recovered. So the 2008 war with Russia appears to have had less effect on Georgia's democratic transition than the 2007 civil unrest and subsequent government crackdown. This is noteworthy, in that war and insecurity are often associated with increased repression by governments in the name of national security. This is especially true in unconsolidated democracies like Georgia. In Georgia's case, however, the opposite occurred: less control by the ruling party and its eventual ouster in elections in 2012 for the parliament and 2013 for the president.

While analysts can rightly criticize

³ Zurab Abashidze, Special Representative of the Prime Minister for Relations with the Russian Federation, interview with the author, July 6, 2018.



Tracking Georgia's democratic development and stability

the Saakashvili government for its authoritarian turn in 2007, it does deserve credit for its actions after the war with Russia. Rather than using the war as a pretense to increase repression in the name of national security, Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM)—with considerable prompting by its Western partners—allowed the rise of a strong and coherent opposition party, Georgian Dream. It then allowed free and fair elections, and when Georgian Dream won those elections, Saakashvili and UNM handed power over peacefully. While people in Western democracies may find this sequence of events unremarkable, in the former Soviet Union—outside of the Baltics—it is uncommon.

Georgia's state fragility scores⁴, another indicator of the level of political

⁴ State Fragility scores used here are compiled by the Center for Systemic Peace (www.systemicpeace.org), and rank states on the effectiveness and legitimacy of their governments. Each of these two categories is further divided into political, security, economic and social indicators.

development, tell a slightly different story about the role of the war on Georgia's political development.⁵ The war appeared to play a more direct role in increasing the fragility of the Georgian state than in eroding the quality of Georgian democracy. However, the war's effect here was temporary. After declining steadily from 1995-2008, Georgia's state fragility scores ticked up after the war before resuming their decline. Today, despite the occupation of 20% of its territory and the presence of Russian military bases inside its international borders, the Center for Systemic Peace assesses the Georgian state as less fragile than it has been at any time in its post-Soviet history.

While the war had a limited effect on Georgia's internal political development, its effect on Georgia's relationships with its separatist regions and Russia has been significant and lasting. As former Georgian

⁵ The *Center for Systemic Peace's* State Fragility Index measures how fragile states are, using a variety of political, security, economic and social indicators. In this index, higher scores denote greater state fragility.



Border checkpoint on the Psou River, Abkhazia. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Defense Minister Giorgi Karkarashvili notes, the war allowed Russia to achieve its goal of standing between Georgia and the separatist regions.⁶ Until 2008, instead of dealing directly with the *de facto* governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow worked through the Georgian central government in Tbilisi. With Russia's victory in the war and its recognition of the independence of the two regions, the situation is reversed: Tbilisi must now work through Moscow to deal with the *de facto* Abkhazian and South Ossetian governments.

Other political developments compound Georgia's sense of political impotence. Most provocative among these are the "borderization" of the boundaries of the separatist regions and the periodic kidnapping of Georgian citizens near these "borders." Especially along the boundary line between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia, Russian border guards are installing barbed wire fences and

⁶ Giorgi Karkarashvili, interview with the author, July 7, 2018.

other barriers, along with signs reading "State Border." Russian "borderization" operations often involve seizing land that had previously been under Georgian central government control. In July 2015, Russia seized 300 acres of land on the Georgian side of the boundary with South Ossetia, moving the boundary to within 550 yards of Georgia's main east-west highway and placing a one-mile segment of a key oil pipeline under Russian control.⁷ In total, Russia has now erected barriers along 52km of the South Ossetia boundary and 49km of the Abkhazia boundary.⁸

Georgians living near these boundary

⁷ Luke Coffey, "Russia's Occupation of Georgia and the Erosion of the International Order," Testimony before The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission), July 17, 2018, p. 12.

⁸ David Bakradze, Ambassador of Georgia to the U.S., "On Violations of the OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation, and Severe Human Rights Situation in the Illegally Occupied Regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/ South Ossetia," Testimony before The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission), July 17, 2018, p. 2.

lines are liable to find their houses or fields suddenly on the wrong side of this “border,” when Russian bulldozers show up and plow a track, usually followed by the installation of barriers and signs. Those who attempt to cross the boundary are in danger of being detained indefinitely by Russian or separatist authorities. Some, such as David Basharuli, Giga Otkhozoria, and Archil Tatumashvili, die under suspicious circumstances in detention.⁹ The “borderization” efforts and associated detentions are a way for Russia to underscore the “legitimacy” of the “borders” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and erode the confidence of Georgian citizens in the ability of their own government to protect them.

Russia’s diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia represents another attempt to burnish their legitimacy, but this effort has so far been mostly unsuccessful. Of the 193 member-states of the United Nations (UN), only five—Russia, Nicaragua, Nauru, Venezuela, and Syria—recognize Georgia’s separatist regions as independent states. By comparison, 111 UN member-states recognize Serbia’s former province of Kosovo, which also declared its independence in 2008. This comparison certainly rankles Russia, which used the “Kosovo-precedent” as part of its justification for recognizing Abkhazia and

South Ossetia.

Despite its lack of success on the international level, Russia’s recognition of Georgia’s separatist regions presents Tbilisi with significant political problems. Prominent Georgian legal scholar Levan Aleksidze believes that Russia’s action has put Georgia in a “legal deadlock.” Russia is unwilling to discuss the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity, instead advising Georgia’s government to learn to live with this “new reality.” For its part, Georgia feels it cannot re-establish diplomatic relations with Russia—much less establish them with Abkhazia and South Ossetia—because doing so would amount to acceptance of Russia’s “new reality.” Aleksidze believes this course of action would cause an avalanche of states to recognize Georgia’s separatist regions, “If five states recognize them now, 105 would recognize them after this.”¹⁰

Other Georgians believe that Russia has created a problem for itself by recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Characterizing Russia’s action as a “hasty response to punish the Georgian government in the hope that the Georgian people would revolt,” political scientist Lasha Dzebisashvili observes that the recognition removed a major source of Russian leverage over Georgia. Before the recognition, Russia could offer a grand bargain, in which it would help Georgia restore its territorial integrity in exchange for Tbilisi abandoning its NATO aspirations. Doing so would force Georgia to choose between its two fundamental imperatives of security and territorial integrity. Now, that political leverage has disappeared. Dzebisashvili also maintains that Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia

⁹ “Two S. Ossetian Security Officers Charged over Tatumashvili Case in Absentia,” *Civil.ge*, June 14, 2018. Internet resource at <https://civil.ge/archives/244506>. Information about deaths in detention is also found in the testimony of David Bakradze, Ambassador of Georgia to the U.S., “On Violations of the OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation, and Severe Human Rights Situation in the Illegally Occupied Regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia,” Testimony before The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission), July 17, 2018, p. 2.

¹⁰ Levan Aleksidze, interview with the author, July 9, 2018.

and South Ossetia leaves any Georgian government seeking to improve relations with Russia little room to maneuver¹¹

“If deterrence fails, Georgia must be able to impose sufficient costs on Russia.”

The impact of the 2008 war on Georgia’s political development has been mixed. While the war did little to disrupt Georgia’s democratic transition, it did raise the level of state fragility temporarily, but the Georgian state soon recovered. The war had more serious effects on Georgia’s political relations with Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Russia’s “borderization” activities and the periodic seizure of Georgian property and citizens cast a shadow of uncertainty and fear in regions along these boundaries. Russia’s diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has created a political and legal conundrum for both Moscow and Tbilisi. As a result, relations between them are limited to pragmatic cooperation in areas—like trade and humanitarian assistance—that sidestep the legal and political problems Russia’s recognition has created.

Military Developments

Georgia’s military capabilities have improved significantly since 2008. Unfortunately, so have Russia’s, and the Russian military’s tactical and operational posture in and around Georgia confers additional advantages it lacked in 2008. In light of these developments, Georgian

defense planners understand that if Russia invades again, Georgia needs to be able to absorb the initial shock and fight for at least seven to ten days. This timeframe will give the international community time to respond and hopefully preserve Georgia’s independence.¹² But Georgia also knows it cannot rely solely on the international community for its salvation. Instead, it must develop an organic capability to deter an invasion.¹³

If deterrence fails, Georgia must be able to impose sufficient costs on Russia that it stops short of toppling the Georgian government and occupying the entire country. Inside Georgia defense planning circles, the conversation has begun to turn from hoped-for salvation via NATO’s Article 5 to Georgia’s responsibility to develop resilient defenses according to NATO’s Article 3. Article 3 states, “In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.”¹⁴ Georgian defense planners hope a robust capacity to resist external attack will not only help deter invasion, but also make the country a more attractive candidate for NATO membership.

Despite years of Western-led training in Georgia and significant experience operating with Western military forces

¹¹ Dr. Lasha Dzebisashvili, interview with the author, July 6, 2018.

¹² Officials from U.S. European Command (on background), interviews with the author, July 12, 2018.

¹³ Batu Kutelia, former Deputy Minister of Defense of Georgia and former Georgian Ambassador to the U.S., interview with the author (via Skype), July 11, 2018.

¹⁴ *The North Atlantic Treaty*, Washington, D.C., April 4, 1949. Internet resource at https://www.nato.int/cps/ie/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm, accessed July 30, 2018.

in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, the Georgian armed forces still have shortcomings in key areas, mostly at the institutional level. U.S. officials familiar with Georgia note that it still lags in the development of institutions that can sustain the training it receives from its Western partners. Part of the reason for this deficiency might be an unanticipated effect of years of Western assistance: Georgia fears that if its armed forces and defense establishment become “too proficient,” the U.S. and other foreign partners will declare their work completed and leave.¹⁵ Both Western and Georgian officials are aware of this paradoxical incentive structure and are working to mitigate its effects.

One way they have attempted to address this paradox is by making the development of sustaining institutions a focus of Western assistance. The Georgian Defense Readiness Program (GDRP), which began in the spring of 2018, differs from previous U.S. capacity-building programs in two respects. First, it focuses explicitly on building Georgia’s capacity to defend itself. Previous programs focused on building deployable capacity to conduct counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations in Iraq or Afghanistan. While these programs trained Georgians in some general military skills, the bulk of their tasks focused on fighting insurgency or terrorism abroad but not defending against a conventional adversary at home. In fact, prior to the 2008 war, U.S. policy specifically prohibited training or equipping Georgian armor, artillery, or attack helicopter forces,

out of concern over provoking Russia¹⁶

The second unique feature of GDRP is that it will build capacity in both the operational forces and the institutions of the Georgian military, with the goal of ensuring that the Ministry of Defense and General Staff can sustain the combat readiness of forces trained by the U.S. Although a bilateral program, the GDRP is integrated with NATO’s efforts to assist Georgia in the development of a Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC), as well as a complementary U.S. effort to develop a Combat Training Center (CTC). Both of these facilities are critical to ensuring Georgia can sustain the military capabilities developed under GDRP.

“Georgia fears that if its armed forces and defense establishment become ‘too proficient’ the U.S. and other foreign partners will declare their work complete and leave.”

Finally, Georgia is improving its capabilities in defense planning, command and control, and procurement. The Georgian government identified these areas as serious deficiencies in the 2008 war; improving these deficiencies is a critical step in any future defense of Georgia from invasion. The U.S. is assisting with defense planning efforts at two levels. First, U.S. trainers are assisting the Georgian General Staff in the development of a military plan for defense of the country, and a second group of U.S. trainers is assisting with

¹⁵ Officials from U.S. European Command (on background), interviews with the author, July 12, 2018.

¹⁶ The author was the Chief of the U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation in Tbilisi from 2006-2008 and was tasked with ensuring his office complied with this policy.



Buk-M1 air defence system (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

the development of a National Defense Strategy (NDS). The plan for defense of the country is the military component of the NDS, which articulates an inter-agency, whole-of-government approach to national defense.

U.S. officials working in Georgia note that Georgia has made considerable progress in command and control since 2008. Rather than relying on a strict, hierarchical command structure from the national level to the tactical level, Georgia has embraced the concept of mission command.¹⁷ Under mission command, tactical units are trained and empowered to operate independently in the absence of orders from higher-level commands. Mission command requires that units at all levels understand the intent and desired outcome of the campaign. This way, if they cannot communicate with their national-level leadership—something quite likely in the event of renewed war with Russia—Georgia units can continue to fight. Georgia has revised its force structure to

equip small units with everything required to fight independently, rather than as part of a large formation.

Georgian procurement reforms support these improvements in command and control. U.S. officials note that Georgia is making “common sense procurement decisions” designed to help it resist invasion by focusing on competing asymmetrically.¹⁸ For instance, Georgia has divested itself of its fighter aircraft, concluding that in a renewed war with Russia it will be unable to compete in this area. Instead, it is focusing on the development of a robust air defense capability, including the purchase of air defense missiles and radars from France. On the ground, the recently approved sale of Javelin anti-tank missiles from the U.S. will help counteract the threat from Russian tanks and armored personnel carriers. The ability to rapidly find and destroy enemy artillery is a critical remaining capability gap. The lessons of both 2008 and the ongoing war in Ukraine make clear that massed Russian

¹⁷ U.S. official in the Republic of Georgia (on background), interview with the author, July 9, 2018.

¹⁸ Ibid.

artillery fires are exceptionally lethal. Until Georgia addresses this gap, its ability to fight a sustained war against Russia will be limited.

Russia has also not stood still since 2008. On the contrary, shortcomings identified in that war served as a key catalyst for a sustained Russian defense reform effort. Although a full accounting of Russia's military reform and modernization efforts is beyond the scope of this report, some bear mention here. A 2018 RAND report concluded that Russia has made notable improvements in its ability to move forces rapidly, its ability to deny adversary forces access to key areas (so-called anti-access/area-denial—or A2/AD—capabilities), and in the quality of its personnel.¹⁹ The fielding of modern weapons systems like the T-14 Armata tank, the Su-57 fighter aircraft, and an array of new missiles complements these capability gains. Finally, experience gained in recent conflicts—especially Syria—further improves Russia's ability to use military force to achieve its policy objectives.

Russia used the war and its subsequent diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to improve its strategic position in the South Caucasus. In 2008, Russian forces inside Georgia's internationally recognized borders were limited to the two Russian peacekeeping contingents of some 2,500 soldiers in Abkhazia and 500 in South Ossetia. Currently, Russia stations some 10,000 military and 3,000 FSB (successor to the

KGB) forces in these two areas.²⁰ Freed from the caveats on the activity of its forces that existed before the war, when they performed a peacekeeping role, Russia has transformed Abkhazia and South Ossetia into major staging bases for its military. An expanded Russian contingent at its Gyumri base in Armenia, where some 5,000 troops are now stationed, further strengthens Moscow's military stance in the South Caucasus.²¹ Georgian analysts believe the recently-signed agreement creating a joint Russian-Armenian military force charged with thwarting or repelling "foreign aggression" against either country could pose a threat to Georgia, since it could allow Russia to launch an attack on Georgia from its base in Armenia.²²

Unlike in 2008, when Russia had smaller military contingents inside Georgia and had to introduce additional forces through the narrow Roki Tunnel into South Ossetia and by rail or sea into Abkhazia, in a renewed war, Russia could attack Georgia from four directions with significantly more force. Aside from the larger contingents already in Abkhazia

19 Scott Boston, Michael Johnson, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Yvonne K. Crane, "Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority," RAND Corporation, 2018. Internet resource at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2402.html, accessed July 30, 2018.

20 David Bakradze, Ambassador of Georgia to the U.S., "On Violations of the OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation, and Severe Human Rights Situation in the Illegally Occupied Regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia," Testimony before The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission), July 17, 2018, p. 2.

21 Can Kasapoglu, "Russian Forward Military Basing in Armenia and Moscow's Influence in the South Caucasus," NATO Defense College, November 2017, p. 6. Internet resource at <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1122>, accessed July 30, 2018.

22 Dr. Vakhtang Maisaia, interview with the author, July 9, 2018. The joint agreement in question is described in an article entitled, "Armenian Parliament Approves New Defense Agreement with Russia," *Armenian Weekly*, October 5, 2017. Internet resource at <https://armenianweekly.com/2017/10/05/armenian-parliament-approves-new-defense-agreement-russia/>, accessed July 30, 2018.

and South Ossetia, Russia could attack from Armenian soil and from the Russian Republic of Dagestan, where it is building a new road to the Georgian border.²³

The 2008 war was a significant catalyst for military reform and modernization in both Russia and Georgia. Like the political picture of developments since the war, the military picture is mixed. Improvements in defense planning, command and control, force structure, and procurement have significantly strengthened the capability of Georgia's armed forces to defend the country. Questions about the ability of Georgia's defense institutions to sustain these improvements over time remain, but Georgia and its international partners are addressing these issues. Russia's improvements to its military capability have also been impressive, and its military strategic position has improved significantly since 2008, with more forces deployed to areas from which they can directly and rapidly attack Georgia.

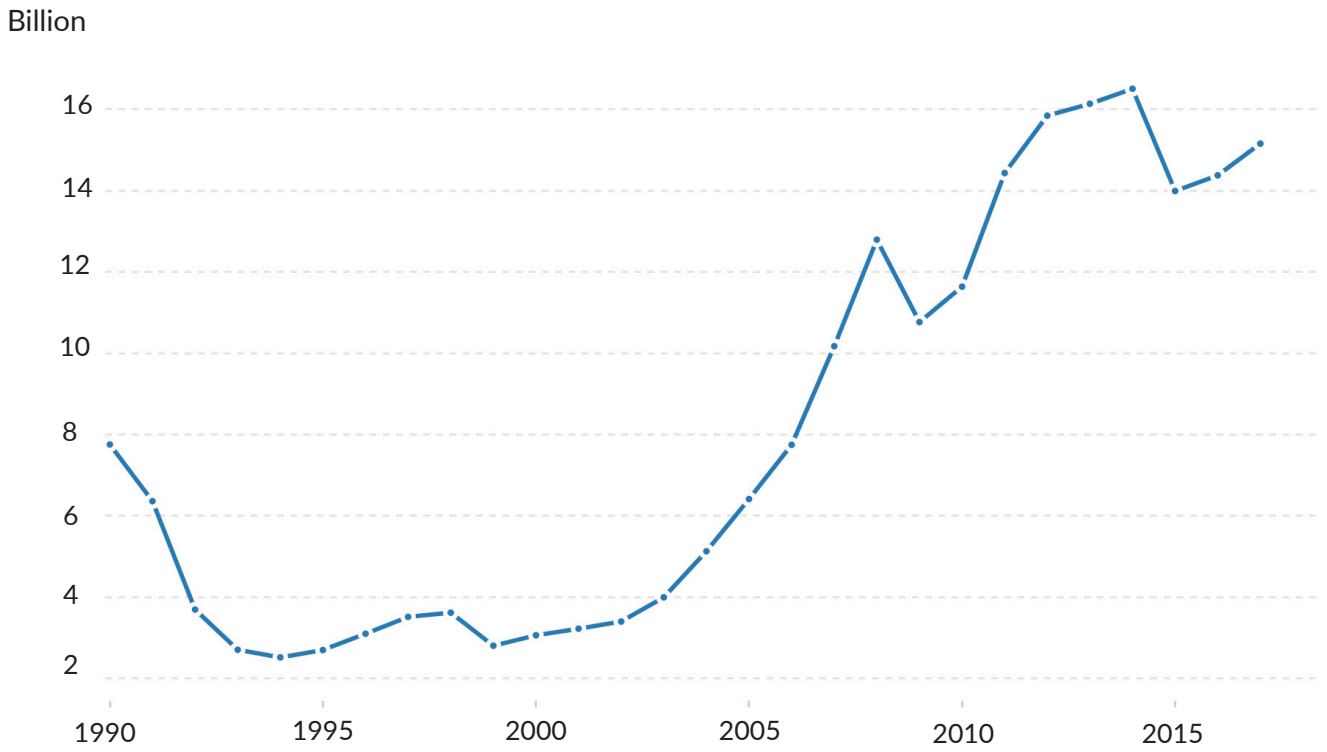
In the event of renewed war between Russia and Georgia, two greatly improved armies will face each other. In this situation, how and why they fight will matter greatly. In a limited war fought in a conventional manner, for example—forcing open a corridor from Russia to Armenia—Russia

can bring its massive advantages to bear. A war with more expansive aims—for example, the toppling of the Georgian government and the occupation of most or all of Georgia—stands a greater chance of dragging Russia into an insurgency in which Georgia can better use the capabilities it has developed since 2008. A war of this type would also give the international community time to mount a sustained campaign to stop the war and impose costs on Russia for its invasion.

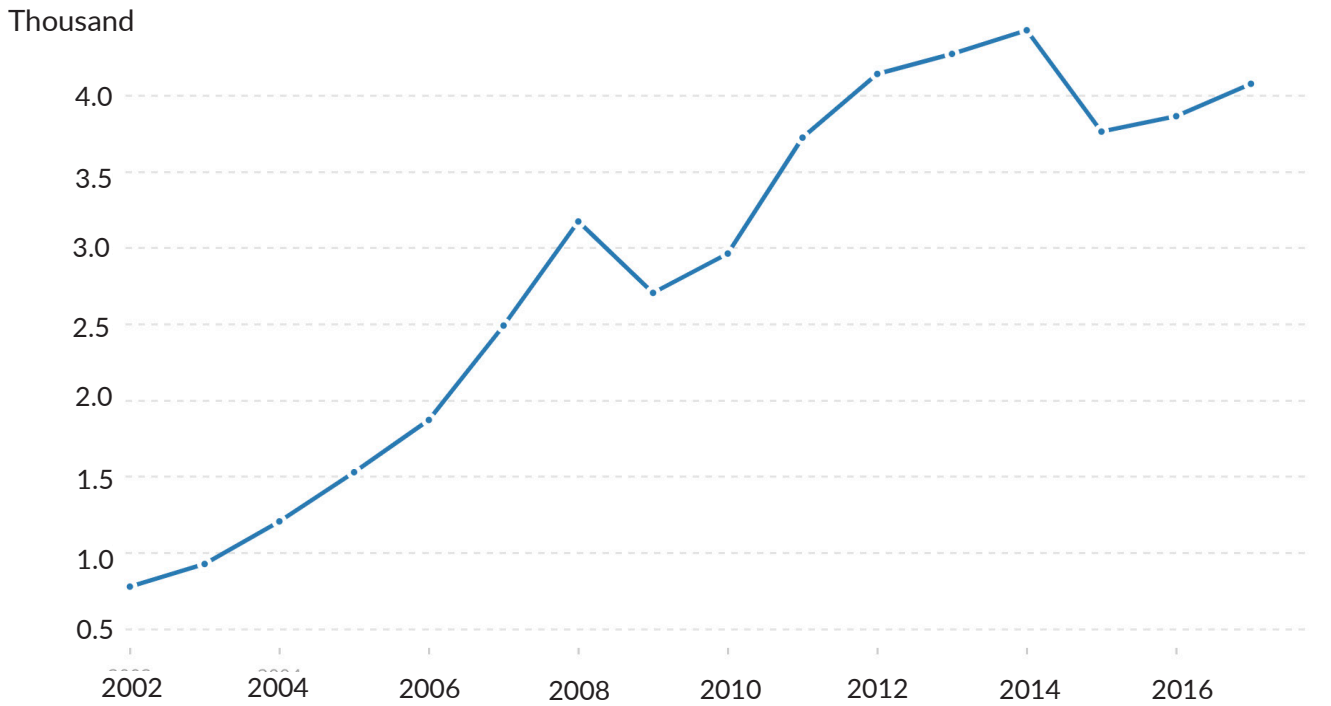
Economic Developments

Georgia's economic picture since the war is more clearly positive than its political or military pictures. The war and the global financial crisis in 2008 hit the economy hard, as did—ironically—Western sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Since Russia is Georgia's top trade partner and a major source of remittances, the impact of the Western sanctions on the Russian economy quickly rippled out to Georgia. However, Georgia has recovered from this economic shock and stands poised to continue its growth. Economic gains since 2008 are part of a larger economic revitalization that began soon after the Rose Revolution in 2003. Prior to the Rose Revolution, Georgia was saddled with a largely Soviet-style economy, and rampant corruption acted as a drag on growth. Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index* shows the effect of Georgia's anti-corruption efforts. In 2002, Georgia ranked 85th out of 102 countries measured in terms of fighting corruption, meaning that it was more corrupt than over 83% of the countries surveyed. By 2008 Georgia ranked 67th out of 180 countries, meaning it was more corrupt than 37% of the countries surveyed. In 2017, Georgia ranked 46th out of 180 countries, meaning it was more corrupt than only 25% of the

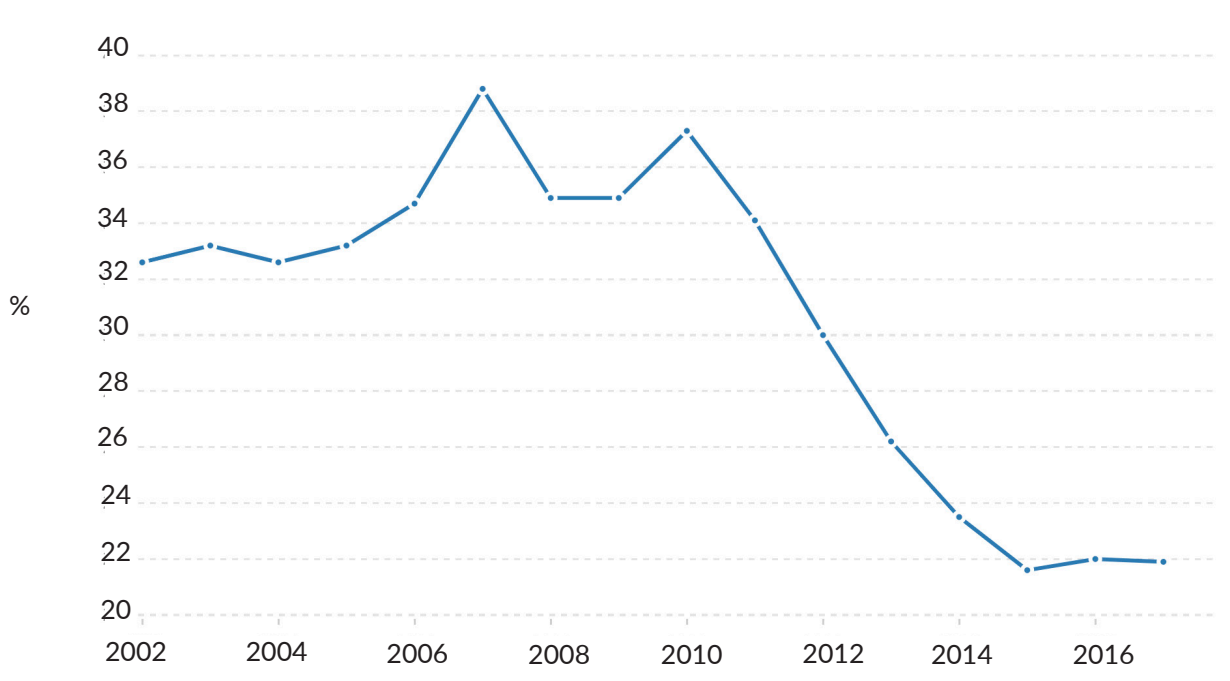
23 Dr. Vakhtang Maisaia, interview with the author, July 9, 2018. The road to the Georgian border, which Russia claims is only for the development of transportation links between the two countries, is detailed in an article entitled, "Russia Building New Road From Dagestan to Georgia," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 14, Issue 100, July 27, 2017. Internet resource at: <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-building-new-road-from-dagestan-to-georgia/>, accessed July 30, 2018. Georgians are skeptical about Russian claims that the road is for the purpose of improving transportation links, recalling Russia's renovation of the railroad from Russia to Abkhazia in 2007-2008, which Russia claimed was only for "humanitarian purposes." In the 2008 war with Georgia, Russia used that railroad to deploy forces and equipment into Abkhazia.



Georgia GDP (current US\$) (Source: World Bank)



Georgia GDP per capita (current US\$) (Source: World Bank)



Georgia poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population)
 Source: World Bank

countries surveyed.²⁴ Georgia instituted rapid economic liberalization alongside its anti-corruption efforts. The World Bank’s *Doing Business* report, which tracks regulatory reforms aimed at improving the ease of doing business in the world’s economies, ranked Georgia 100 out of 155 countries in 2006. By 2008, Georgia had risen to 18th place, and, in 2017, it ranked in 9th place.²⁵

These reforms have rapidly expanded Georgia’s economy, a process the 2008 war interrupted only briefly. Georgia’s real gross domestic product (GDP) and GDP per capita rose rapidly after the Rose Revolution before briefly falling in 2009 as a result of the war and the global financial crisis. By 2014, both had risen to new highs before declining again as a result of

the contraction of the Russian economy, hit by Western sanctions and falling oil prices. Currently, both real GDP and GDP per capita are again on the rise. Georgia’s exports are also on the rise—increasing by 28.5% in the first half of 2018 over the same period in 2017. Of these exports, those to the EU now eclipse those to Russia by \$164 million, which should provide Georgia some insulation against future economic downturns caused by Western sanctions against Russia.²⁶ The following tables track GDP and GDP per capita from 2002-2016.

The Saakashvili government’s rapid reforms unquestionably put Georgia on the path to economic growth, but had the secondary effect of increasing income inequality and the rate of poverty. The current government has focused on

²⁴ *Transparency International* country page for Georgia. Internet resource at <https://www.transparency.org/country/GEO>, accessed August 6, 2018.

²⁵ *The World Bank*, “Doing Business” survey, internet resource at <http://www.doingbusiness.org/rankings>, accessed August 6, 2018.

²⁶ Thea Morrison, “Export from Georgia to EU Exceeds Export to Russia by \$164m”, *Georgia Today*, July 20, 2018, internet resource at <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/11434/Export-from-Georgia-to-EU-Exceeds-Export-to-Russia-by-%24164m>

decreasing income inequality and the poverty rate. The following tables track the poverty rate from 2002-2016.

The rapid reforms of Saakashvili's United National Movement government set the stage for Georgia's economic take-off. The efforts of the current Georgian Dream government to ensure that economic benefits are shared more broadly should increase economic resilience and social stability. Other, less traditional economic indicators give cause for more optimism. For several years in a row, Georgia has set records for tourism. Over 8 million visitors are expected in 2018, which would continue the recent pattern of increases of some 20% per year over the past several years.²⁷ This rapid increase in tourism and overall economic growth is occurring in the environment of political tension and uncertainty caused by Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Social-Psychological Developments

What makes Georgia's economic resilience even more noteworthy is that Georgians acknowledge that the war had serious and lasting social and psychological effects. The most visible of these is the expulsion of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This phenomenon dates to the wars of the early 1990s, but accelerated—especially in South Ossetia—with the 2008 war, when some 35,000 Georgian homes in 53 villages were destroyed. In all, some 500,000 ethnic Georgians have been driven from their homes and resettled in other parts of

²⁷ Thea Morrison, "Georgian PM Expects Over 8 mln Tourists This Year," *Georgia Today*, March 29, 2018. Internet resource at <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/9716/Georgian-PM-Expects-over-8-Million-Tourists-This-Year>, accessed August 6, 2018.

Georgia.²⁸

Other effects of the war are less visible, but perhaps just as consequential. Citizens of Western states have recently become accustomed to hearing the terms "hybrid war" or "gray zone war" in relation to Russian activities in their countries. Russia has targeted Georgia, Ukraine, and other neighboring states using these methods for years. In Georgia, one instrument of the Russian campaign to destabilize the state is the funding of non-governmental organizations and think tanks, which in reality serve to propagate Russian views and undermine confidence in the Georgian government by spreading false or misleading information.²⁹ These organizations are hard to combat because suppressing them opens the Georgian government to charges of restriction of free speech.

"Russia has used its presence in Georgia in the aftermath of the war to intimidate ordinary Georgians and erode confidence in the ability of their government to protect them."

As noted earlier, Russia has used its presence in Georgia in the aftermath of the war to intimidate ordinary Georgians and erode confidence in the ability of

²⁸ David Bakradze, Ambassador of Georgia to the U.S., "On Violations of the OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation, and Severe Human Rights Situation in the Illegally Occupied Regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/ South Ossetia," Testimony before The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission), July 17, 2018, p. 2.

²⁹ Dr. Vakhtang Maisaia, interview with the author, July 9, 2018.

their government to protect them. It is not uncommon for Russian and separatist authorities to detain Georgian citizens along the new “state borders,” and at least three of those detained have died in detention. Georgia’s requests for investigations into these deaths have gone unanswered.³⁰ This campaign of intimidation contributes to what former Georgian Defense Minister Giorgi Karkarashvili describes as a “constriction of the ability to think broadly and openly,” and a reversion to more basic needs such as survival.³¹

Russia’s disinformation and intimidation campaigns, combined with the West’s perceived ambivalence about Georgia, are having an effect. Georgian political scientist and government official Lasha Dzebisashvili observes that a “nihilistic sentiment” has taken hold among a portion of the Georgian population. These Georgians saw Russia’s willingness to use force in Georgia and have decided that no amount of military preparation or Western integration can save the country.³² Among some of the Georgian population, the idea is taking hold that the West is not willing to accept them and will not help them defend themselves, so the best way to survive is not to pursue NATO membership, but to

make a deal with Russia.³³

Surveys generally support these ideas by showing a small but steady decline in support for NATO membership among Georgians. In January 2008, 77% of Georgian citizens supported Georgian NATO accession. In 2011 that proportion had fallen to 71%; in 2015, it was 68%; and in 2018, it stood at 65%. However, the most recent poll, taken in June 2018 registered a surge in support for NATO membership to 75%. It remains to be seen whether this represents a reversal of the downward trend or simply a statistical anomaly³⁴ Despite the social-psychological trauma of the war and the wavering support for NATO integration, Georgians see the future of their country’s security in fairly positive terms. In a March 2018, poll 49% of respondents said Georgia will be more protected in ten years, with only 22% responding that it will be less protected.³⁵

The consequences of the war for Georgia,

33 Batu Kutelia, former Deputy Minister of Defense of Georgia and former Georgian Ambassador to the U.S., interview with the author (via Skype), July 11, 2018.

34 The first figure is from Jim Nichol, *Georgia (Republic) and NATO Enlargement*, Congressional Research Service, March 6, 2009. Internet resource at <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a500414.pdf>, accessed July 24, 2018. The three later figures are from periodic National Democratic Institute public opinion polls in Georgia. Available at <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>, accessed August 7, 2018. The most recent poll, in June 2018, showed a 10% jump in support for NATO membership, which again stood at 75%. It remains to be seen whether this is an anomaly or portends a reversal in the downward trend of the past ten years.

35 Laura Thornton and Koba Turbanidze, “Public attitudes in Georgia: Results of March 2018 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.” Internet resource at https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_March_2018_Public%20Presentation_English_final.pdf, accessed August 7, 2018.

30 David Bakradze, Ambassador of Georgia to the U.S., “On Violations of the OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation, and Severe Human Rights Situation in the Illegally Occupied Regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/ South Ossetia,” Testimony before The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission), July 17, 2018, p. 2.

31 Giorgi Karkarashvili, interview with the author, July 7, 2018.

32 Dr. Lasha Dzebisashvili, interview with the author, July 6, 2018.



then, were mixed. Politically, although the war had little effect on Georgia's democratic transition, Russia's diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia created a quandary for both Tbilisi and Moscow. While the former can never acknowledge the independence of its former territories, the latter finds itself isolated and unable to gain broad acceptance for its actions. This lack of diplomatic common ground limits interaction between Georgia and Russia to pragmatic and apolitical topics such as a tourism and humanitarian assistance. Militarily, both Georgia and Russia have gained strength, but Russia's larger military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia gives it advantages it lacked in 2008. Economically, the 2008 war and the 2014 sanctions imposed by the West on Russia both impacted the Georgian economy, but on both cases, it quickly rebounded and continued its trajectory of growth. Recent work by the Georgian government to reduce income inequality and poverty is showing results, but Georgians still list

economic concerns as the most important national issue.³⁶ Georgia's economic growth is occurring against a backdrop mostly negative social and psychological consequences of the war, including the expulsion of ethnic Georgians from their homes and pervasive concern about the threat from Russia. This concern, combined with the sense that the West is losing interest in Georgia, has contributed to gradually eroding support for NATO membership among Georgians.

³⁶ For instance, in the June 2018 NDI poll, the top four national issues respondents listed were jobs, poverty, rising prices/inflation, and pensions. Internet resource at, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_June_2018_Presentation_Public_ENG_vf.pdf, accessed August 7, 2018.

Consequences for the West

This section of the paper examines the consequences of the war for the West, defined as NATO, the European Union, and the United States. It first surveys how each of these entities dealt with Georgia in the war's wake, and then how the war affected their relationships with Russia. Although each Western entity dealt with the consequences of 2008 differently, Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine caused all of them to re-assess their relationships with Russia and the meaning of the 2008 war.

NATO-Georgia Relations

NATO's relationship with Georgia intersects with the war on multiple levels. The issue of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine was the most contentious issue at the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest. The U.S. led a group of members pushing for Georgia and Ukraine to be granted Membership Action Plans (MAPs) at that summit; skeptics led by Germany resisted this idea. In the end, the sides came to a compromise that withheld MAP from Georgia and Ukraine, but the summit communique declared that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."³⁷

In retrospect, the flaw in this compromise was that it made clear to Russia that NATO had no obligation to protect Georgia

in the present but would assume that obligation in the future. This let Russia know that its window of opportunity to prevent Georgia's NATO membership was closing. If Russia hoped to demonstrate its willingness to use force against Georgia and the difficulty NATO would have in protecting its future member, it had to do so quickly. Four months after the Bucharest NATO Summit, Russia sent those messages clearly to all NATO capitals.

"The Georgian government understands that NATO membership is not in the cards in the near future, but it – at least officially – is optimistic about its future prospects."

Although the day-to-day relationship between NATO and Georgia recovered quickly from the war and is deeper now than it has ever been, the war took membership off the table, at least for the foreseeable future. U.S. officials interviewed for this paper admitted that despite continued U.S. support for Georgia's NATO membership and NATO's official open door policy, the country has no chance of becoming an Alliance member for at least the next several years. U.S. officials believe that Georgia understands this reality and has adopted a more pragmatic approach toward NATO membership, which involves "sticking as close to the U.S. as possible in the hope

³⁷ "Bucharest Summit Declaration," North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Internet resource at https://www.nato.int/cps/us/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm, accessed August 7, 2018.

that something changes over time.”³⁸

One way Georgia stays close to the U.S. is through its contribution to the U.S.-led NATO mission in Afghanistan. Barely a year after the 2008 war, Georgia sent its first contingent of combat troops there, when a company of 173 soldiers deployed to Kabul. In early 2010, Georgia deployed a contingent of 750 soldiers to the volatile Helmand Province, where they fought under U.S. command. In October 2012, Georgia increased the size of its force in Helmand to over 1,500. Currently, Georgia maintains a contingent of some 870 troops in Afghanistan, making it the largest non-NATO contributor to NATO’s Resolute Support mission there.³⁹

Perhaps to compensate for its unwillingness to admit Georgia as a member, NATO has significantly expanded its role in Georgia since 2008. The most visible and consequential indicator is the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP). Agreed to at the 2014 NATO Summit, the SNGP is designed to improve Georgia’s territorial defense capabilities, enhance interoperability with NATO allies, and prepare Georgia for eventual NATO membership. The program originally consisted of 13 initiatives across an array of functions, each led by a NATO lead-nation.⁴⁰ At the 2016 Summit NATO added two additional initiatives, one of which was completed in 2017, leaving 14 initiatives currently underway. Georgia

is the only non-NATO state with such a program.⁴¹ While impressive in its scope and for the fact that it is explicitly designed to help Georgia defend itself, SNGP is at least in part intended to assuage Georgia’s disappointment at NATO’s lack of progress in fulfilling its 2008 Bucharest Summit promise.

The Georgian government understands that NATO membership is not in the cards in the near future, but it—at least officially—is optimistic about its future prospects. It remains to be seen whether that optimism is justified.

EU-Georgia Relations

Although not tied to the start of the 2008 war in the way NATO was, the EU has been closely involved in its aftermath. The EU’s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG) report—more commonly known as the Tagliavini report, after the name of the mission’s head—attempted to discover the causes of the conflict and judge how the combatants conducted themselves. The report concluded that although “the shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict in Georgia” that incident was in fact “the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, provocations and incidents.”⁴² Among these provocations

38 Officials from U.S. European Command (on background), interviews with the author, July 12, 2018.

39 Luke Coffey, “Russia’s Occupation of Georgia and the Erosion of the International Order,” Testimony before The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission), July 17, 2018, p. 4.

40 Unsigned Information Paper, “U.S.-Georgia Bilateral Security Relationship,” U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation-Georgia, May 1, 2017.

41 Luke Coffey, “Russia’s Occupation of Georgia and the Erosion of the International Order,” Testimony before The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission), July 17, 2018, p. 8.

42 “Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia,” *Volume I*, September 2009, p. 11. Internet resource at https://web.archive.org/web/20091007030130/http://www.ceiig.ch/pdf/IIFFMCG_Volume_I.pdf, accessed August 9, 2018.

were “mass conferral of Russian citizenship” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the presence of non-peacekeeping Russian troops in South Ossetia before the war, and Russia’s long-standing support for the separatist authorities in the two regions. In its assessment of the conduct of the combatants, the Tagliavini Report concluded that Russia used disproportionate force against Georgia and raised “serious question marks” about the complicity of the Russian Army in the atrocities committed against the civilian Georgian population.⁴³ As Georgian official Zurab Abashidze notes wryly, the evidence that the Tagliavini Report was objective is that no one in either Moscow or Tbilisi liked it.⁴⁴

Before 2008, the UN headed the peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) headed its counterpart in South Ossetia. As part of the EU-mediated plan to end the war, all sides agreed to the deployment of an EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to Georgia. Russia used the deployment of the EUMM to argue that there was no longer a need for UN and OSCE oversight of Georgia’s conflicts and refused to authorize the continuation of the mandates of those missions. Russia then used its diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to argue that there was no need for international monitoring of their territory, so the EUMM now only operates on the Georgia side of the conflict lines. Despite its limited role, the Georgian government

43 Ahto Lobjakas, “EU Report On 2008 War Tilts Against Georgia,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 30, 2009. Internet resource at https://www.rferl.org/a/EU_Report_On_2008_War_Tilts_Against_Georgia/1840447.html, accessed August 9, 2018.

44 Zurab Abashidze, Special Representative of the Prime Minister for Relations with the Russian Federation, interview with the author, July 6, 2018.

sees the EUMM as important because it keeps the EU engaged and present in Georgia.⁴⁵

The EU’s Eastern Partnership is the centerpiece of Europe’s engagement with Georgia. This program focuses on building democracy, prosperity, cooperation, and stability in Georgia and five other eastern European states.⁴⁶ For Georgia, the crowning achievements of its participation in the Eastern Partnership are the visa-free regime for travel to Europe and the EU-Georgia Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). As expected, the DCFTA has increased bilateral trade between Georgia and the EU. For 2017, the EU was Georgia’s largest trading partner, comprising 26.6% of Georgia’s total trade.⁴⁷ By comparison, in 2008, Georgia’s top three trading partners were Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine.⁴⁸

Aside from the economic benefits of free trade with Europe and visa-free travel to Europe, the Eastern Partnership provides an opportunity for Georgia to advance the idea that it is a European state. As one American official remarked, major European countries now have a greater stake in Georgia’s future.⁴⁹

45 Ibid.

46 These countries are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus.

47 “European Union, Trade in goods with Georgia,” *European Commission-Directorate General for Trade*, April 16, 2018, p. 3. Internet resource at http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113383.pdf, accessed August 9, 2018.

48 “Georgian Economic Outlook,” *Ministry of Economic Development of Georgia*. Internet resource at <http://www.oecd.org/global-relations/43361054.pdf>, accessed August 9, 2018.

49 Official from U.S. European Command (on background), interviews with the author, July 12, 2018.



U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi, August 2017.
Source: georgiaembassyusa.org

U.S.-Georgia Relations

The 2008 war, U.S. presidential election, and global financial crisis—all of which occurred within a few months of each other—represented an inflection point for U.S. policy toward Georgia. The incoming Obama administration pursued a foreign policy based upon pragmatic cooperation with Russia, symbolized by the “reset” button Secretary of State Hillary Clinton handed Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in March 2009. U.S. policy in Georgia focused on developing the country’s economy, infrastructure, and political institutions; the administration also banned lethal military aid. Many Georgian officials viewed the U.S.-Russia reset skeptically and felt the U.S. was holding their country hostage to a policy destined to fail.

The degradation in U.S.-Russian relations in 2011-2012 had no immediate effect on U.S. policy toward Georgia, but Russia’s 2014 intervention in Ukraine did. Russia’s seizure of Crimea and intervention

in eastern Ukraine brought about a fundamental reassessment of U.S. policy toward Ukraine, Georgia, and other states along Russia’s borders. In its second term, the Obama administration decided to assist Georgia in developing its capacity to defend itself and carried out this decision through the Georgian Defense Readiness Program (GDRP) described earlier. The U.S. unveiled its new thinking on Georgia in July 2016 when “Secretary of State John Kerry visited Tbilisi and signed a new military cooperation agreement with an increased emphasis on territorial defense and training for combat, rather than peacekeeping”.⁵⁰

Trump administration policy toward Georgia reflects a split between the President and his key foreign policy and national security advisors. On the one

⁵⁰ Joshua Kucera, “Georgia: Trump Administration Boosting Military Aid,” *Eurasianet*, November 14, 2017. Internet resource at <https://eurasianet.org/s/georgia-trump-administration-boosting-military-aid>, accessed August 9, 2018.

hand, the U.S. agreed to sell Javelin anti-tank weapons to Georgia, something the Obama administration had declined to do. The administration also fast-tracked the sale so that the first Javelins arrived in months, rather than the years that it often takes for U.S. weapons to be delivered to foreign partners. Vice President Mike Pence's August 2017 visit to Tbilisi was also a major confidence-builder. A U.S. official confirmed that Pence told his Georgian interlocutors, "'We will be with you until you get into NATO,' and that was a very, very powerful message."⁵¹ Finally, Georgians have confidence in the role of Secretary of Defense James Mattis. As Georgian analyst Kornely Kakachia notes, "Mattis has more contact with Georgia, he knows post-Soviet politics, he knows Russia."⁵²

"Can Georgia maintain its Westward orientation without the security that NATO membership brings?"

The administration has also sent signals that have unnerved Georgia. President Trump's affinity for Putin and his frequent assertion that getting along with Russia is "a good thing" make Georgians nervous. Some Georgians wondered whether the July 2018 Helsinki Summit might result in a deal that *de facto* ceded Georgia and Ukraine to a Russian sphere of influence in response for a Russian promise to not interfere in the Baltics.⁵³ Finally, the administration's first foreign aid budget zeroed out military aid for Georgia. The \$35

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Georgian officials, interviews with the author, July 5-10, 2018.

million that Georgia received in 2017 was an earmark authorized and appropriated by Congress in a modification of the administration's budget request.⁵⁴

Perhaps reflecting the fractured nature of current U.S. policy toward Georgia, a senior U.S. official remarked that, ten years after the 2008 war, the U.S. is "still trying to get Georgia right." The Georgian Defense Readiness Program and approval of lethal aid to Georgia are positive steps, but NATO membership, in this official's mind, was "never really in the cards" because of reservations among European allies and the red line it represents for Russia. In the end, this official believes that Russia is losing the new "great game" because Georgia will still be westward leaning, though not a member of NATO.⁵⁵ Now, one must ask: Can Georgia maintain its Westward orientation without the security that NATO membership brings?

NATO-Russia Relations

In a recent interview, Henry Kissinger remarked, "The mistake NATO has made is to think that there is a sort of historic evolution that will march across Eurasia and not to understand that somewhere along that march it will encounter something very different to a Westphalian entity."⁵⁶ 2008 made the differences in world views between NATO and Russia clear. Whereas NATO saw its enlargement as a way to ensure stability and institutionalize

⁵⁴ Official from U.S. European Command (on background), interviews with the author, July 12, 2018.

⁵⁵ Official from U.S. European Command (on background), interviews with the author, July 12, 2018.

⁵⁶ Edward Luce, "Henry Kissinger: 'We are in a very, very grave period,'" *Financial Times*, July 20, 2018. Internet resource at <https://www.ft.com/content/926a66b0-8b49-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543>, accessed August 20, 2018.

political and economic reform in a newly expanded Europe, Russia saw its old Cold War foe marching toward its doorstep.

Russia's reaction in 2008 stunned the Allies and led NATO to suspend operation of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), but, by spring 2009, operations resumed. NATO again suspended all cooperation with Russia under the NRC in April 2014 after the Russian intervention in Ukraine. In March 2018, reacting to the nerve agent attack in the United Kingdom, NATO expelled a number of Russian diplomats from the Russian Mission to NATO. In May 2018, however, the NRC began meeting again at the ambassadorial level in Brussels, reflecting NATO's current policy of suspending practical cooperation with Russia, but keeping channels for political dialogue open.

NATO finds itself in a quandary with Russia. On the one hand, with few exceptions, the Allies "recognize the challenge posed by a revanchist Russia."⁵⁷ On the other, some NATO members prefer to return to "business as usual" soon after any crisis in the Alliance's relationship with Moscow. Absent Russia's intervention in Ukraine and use of a chemical agent on British soil, it is unlikely that the war in Georgia would have had any long-term impact on NATO-Russia relations. As it is, the resumption of the operation of the NRC implies that the two sides want to find a way to continue communicating even as they disagree fundamentally on key issues. For Russia's part, its interventions in Georgia and Ukraine achieved the goal of keeping both countries out of NATO

⁵⁷ Damon Wilson, "Russia's Occupation of Georgia and the Erosion of the International Order," Testimony before The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission), July 17, 2018, p. 2.

For Russia's part, its interventions in Georgia and Ukraine achieved the goal of keeping both countries out of NATO for the foreseeable future, so Russia is satisfied with the status quo.

for the foreseeable future, so Russia is satisfied with the status quo.⁵⁸

EU-Russia Relations

Because it is devoid of any significant security dimension, the EU-Russia relationship was not disrupted as significantly by the war as the NATO-Russia relationship. Russia's actions in Georgia shocked EU member states—the majority of which are also NATO members. The EU itself, however, acted as a peacemaker during the war and after the war published the Tagliavini Report, which laid blame for the conflict on both sides. In the years since the war, the economic competition that has arisen between Russia and the EU, and Russia's intervention in Ukraine, have caused a downturn in EU-Russia ties.

The EU called Russia's violation of Georgia's territorial integrity and recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia "unacceptable" and labeled Russia's claim to a sphere of influence outside its borders a "cause for concern."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Brussels went ahead with the EU-Russia summit planned for November 2008, two months after the war. The economic

⁵⁸ Official from U.S. European Command (on background), interview with the author, July 12, 2018.

⁵⁹ EU Memo 08/678, "Review of EU-Russia Relations," November 5, 2008, p. 1. Internet resource at europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-08-678_en.pdf, accessed August 21, 2018.



relationship between the EU and Russia was a main reason for the rapid resumption of normal contacts between them.

Reflecting this phenomenon, the EU noted shortly after the war, “Trade and investment between the EU and Russia are substantial and growing, and it is in our mutual interest that this trend should continue. Russia is our third most important trading partner and we see growth rates of up to 20% every year.” Brussels also noted that Russia’s “sustained high growth rates and emerging middle class” made Russia “an important emerging market on our doorstep that offers opportunities

to EU enterprises.”⁶⁰ On energy, the EU contended that “the relationship is one of interdependence not dependence.”⁶¹

The EU’s reluctance to disrupt its relationship with Russia after the latter’s intervention in Georgia did not, however, lead to long-term rapprochement between Brussels and Moscow. As early as 2009, although ties were still strong, Russians began to be suspicious of the EU’s outreach to post-Soviet states in the form of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EaP focused on developing bilateral ties between the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan,

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, an action that Russian President Medvedev claimed was “a partnership against Russia.”⁶²

Despite this skepticism among Russia’s leaders, the Russian public remained mostly positive about the EU at least through 2011. Surveys that year showed that over 70% of those surveyed assessed EU-Russia relations as very good or good, and only 16% as negative or very negative.⁶³ That same survey, however, showed a storm gathering over the issue of Ukraine, concluding, “Public perception of Ukraine’s hostility towards Russia has risen only recently, with that country’s increasing rapprochement with the EU.”⁶⁴

That storm erupted in November 2013 when Russian pressure and inducement convinced Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to reject an Association Agreement with the EU in favor of economic partnership with Russia. Yanukovich’s decision brought thousands of protestors onto Kyiv’s Independence Square, ushering in a prolonged standoff with the government. The government’s decision to forcibly disperse the protesters, culminating in a deadly attack in mid-February 2014, resulted in Yanukovich’s resignation. Russia responded to what it termed an illegal coup by annexing Crimea and, later, fomenting conflict in eastern Ukraine.

The EU reacted to these events more forcefully than it had in 2008, freezing

62 Sergey Tumanov, Aleksander Gasparishvili and Ekaterina Romanova, “Russia–EU Relations, or How the Russians Really View the EU,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* vol. 27, no. 1 (2011), p. 131.

63 Ibid, p. 135.

64 Ibid, p. 137.

policy dialogues and mechanisms of cooperation with Russia and imposing sanctions in tandem with the U.S. However, even in this environment, Brussels held out the hope of a return to normalcy in its relations with Moscow, noting that “Russia remains a natural partner for the EU and a strategic player combating the regional and global challenges.”⁶⁵

U.S.-Russia Relations

U.S.-Russia relations since 2008 have been volatile and remain less coherent and predictable than Russia’s relations with other major Western actors. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Bush administration deployed warships to the Black Sea, organized a package of humanitarian and economic aid for Georgia, and placed sanctions on Russia. But as a hedge against unintended escalation, the U.S. made clear that the warships were on a humanitarian mission, and the sanctions were mostly limited to freezing the agreement on commercial nuclear cooperation between the U.S. and Russia.

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency marked a clear break in U.S. policy toward Russia. In early 2009, as noted previously, the U.S. embarked on its “reset,” the goal of which was to pursue pragmatic cooperation with Moscow on issues of mutual interest. Implicit in the reset was a U.S. determination not to allow Russia’s relations with its neighbors to derail U.S.-Russia cooperation on issues Washington deemed more important.

65 “The European Union and the Russian Federation,” *EU External Action Service*, November 21, 2017. Internet resource at https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35939/european-union-and-russian-federation_en, accessed August 21, 2018.



President Donald Trump and President Vladimir Putin at the Helsinki Summit, July 2018. (Source: Wikicommons)

Although the reset had already fizzled by the time of the Russian seizure of Crimea, that event plunged the U.S.-Russia relationship into a crisis from which it has yet to recover. The Obama administration led a combined Western response that placed targeted economic sanctions on Russia and ejected it from the G-8. The U.S. later expanded those sanctions after Russia intervened in eastern Ukraine. As a result, Russian GDP, which had been growing by 1.8-5.3% annually since recovering from the 2008 financial crisis, grew by only 0.74% in 2014 and shrank by 2.83% in 2015.⁶⁶

Russians hoped that the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency would bring sanctions relief and another reset in the relationship, but these hopes remain unrealized. President Trump seems loathe to criticize Russia or Putin directly for either the intervention in Ukraine or for the interference in the 2016 election that placed him in the White House. His administration and the U.S. Congress, on the other hand, have shown more resolve. On August 2, 2018, top U.S. intelligence,

⁶⁶ “GDP growth (annual %),” *The World Bank*. Internet resource at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=RU>, accessed August 21, 2018.

national security, and law enforcement officials gave a joint press conference to announce that Russia was trying to interfere in the midterm elections scheduled for November. Not to be outdone, that same day Congress introduced an expanded package of sanctions on Russia that its key backer, Senator Lindsey Graham, called a “bill from hell.”⁶⁷ Later the same month, possibly in a bid to head off

stronger measures contained in the “bill from hell,” the Trump administration imposed new sanctions that include a ban on export to Russia of security sensitive goods and technology. A second tranche of measures, which will go into effect if Russia fails to meet obligations the U.S. has imposed, would include broader trade restrictions and a ban on use of U.S. airports by Russian state airlines.⁶⁸

On the day of his national security team’s press conference and the introduction of the “bill from hell,” President Trump was at a rally in Pennsylvania “boasting about his meeting with Putin” and charging that he was being hindered by a “Russian

⁶⁷ Michael Knigge, “US Congress pushes for new Russia sanctions after election meddling intel,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 4, 2018. Internet resource at <https://www.dw.com/en/us-congress-pushes-for-new-russia-sanctions-after-election-meddling-intel/a-44951543>, accessed August 21, 2018.

⁶⁸ “Chemical Reaction: Sanctions on Russia,” *The Economist Espresso*, August 22, 2018. Internet resource at <https://espresso.economist.com/d7bbb-6396ce5daf19ec6cf4bb4453137>, accessed August 22, 2018.

hoax,”⁶⁹ presumably a reference to the investigation of Russia’s interference in the 2016 elections. Chris Miller, co-director of the Russia program at Tufts University and director of the Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, believes Trump’s reticence on Russia has stirred Congress to action, knowing that it can count on support from the American people. “In aggregate, Americans are fairly hawkish on Russia. There is very little constituency in the U.S. electorate for a softer policy on Russia,” according to Miller.⁷⁰ An excessively hard line, however, is also not popular: a recent Gallup poll found that only 36% of Americans agreed that the U.S. should take “strong diplomatic and economic steps against Russia.”⁷¹

Despite the lack of consistency in U.S. policy toward Russia since 2008, a review of that period makes two things clear. First, the Russia-Georgia war had little enduring effect on U.S.-Russia relations, but Russia’s 2014 intervention in Ukraine has had such an effect. There are several possible reasons for this dichotomy. First, Ukraine is simply larger and more geopolitically important to the West than is Georgia. Georgia’s geographic location—across the Black Sea in the South Caucasus—makes it easier for Western countries to mentally assign it to a Russian “sphere of influence,” even if no Western policymaker will publicly acknowledge this. Ukraine’s

geography and shared history with EU members like Poland make it harder to mentally assign it to Russia’s “near abroad.”

Next, although Russia clearly provoked Georgia in 2008, it was Georgia that made the first overt military move, allowing those who wish to assign blame to Georgia a rationale for doing so. In Ukraine no such rationale exists—Russia responded to internal Ukrainian unrest and instability by annexing one piece of Ukrainian territory and starting an insurgency in another. Finally, there is the fact that Ukraine represented the second case of Russian intervention in a neighboring state in under six years: 2014 makes it harder to argue that 2008 was an anomaly.⁷²

The next take-away from a review of U.S.-Russia relations is that the 2008 war was more a symptom of the state of the relationship than a prime cause of its deterioration. As one senior U.S. official remarked, the U.S. and Russia spent a good deal of the post-Cold war period talking past each other. We assumed Russia “wanted to be like us,” sort of a “Ukraine on steroids.” In reality, Russia at a minimum hoped to morph Western institutions into something more palatable to them; failing that, it hoped to destroy them.⁷³ Kissinger echoes this idea, remarking that “the West wrongly assumed in the years before Putin annexed Crimea that Russia would adopt the west’s rules-based order.”⁷⁴

69 Michael Knigge, “US Congress pushes for new Russia sanctions after election meddling intel,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 4, 2018. Internet resource at <https://www.dw.com/en/us-congress-pushes-for-new-russia-sanctions-after-election-meddling-intel/a-44951543>, accessed August 21, 2018.

70 Ibid.

71 “Chemical Reaction: Sanctions on Russia,” *Economist Espresso*, August 22, 2018. Internet resource at <https://espresso.economist.com/d7bbb6396ce-5daf19ec6cf4bb4453137>, accessed August 22, 2018.

72 Official from U.S. European Command (on background), interview with the author, July 12, 2018.

73 Official from U.S. European Command (on background), interview with the author, July 12, 2018.

74 Edward Luce, “Henry Kissinger: ‘We are in a very, very grave period,’” *Financial Times*, July 20, 2018. Internet resource at <https://www.ft.com/content/926a66b0-8b49-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543>, accessed August 20, 2018.

Consequences for Global Order and Next Steps

Unsurprisingly, the farther one moves away from Georgia, the less enduring effect the 2008 war there had, at least until a similar Russian intervention against Ukraine in 2014 jolted Western countries and institutions into surmising a pattern in Russia's behavior. NATO suspended all cooperation with Russia in the aftermath of the 2008 war, but, within nine months, the NATO-Russia Council resumed meeting. The EU went ahead with its planned summit with Russia three months after the war, and despite characterizing Russia's actions as "unacceptable," actively pursued economic and energy partnership with Russia until 2014. In the U.S., the change in presidential administrations a few months after the war ushered in a reset in U.S.-Russia relations. Although the reset had run its course and tension had crept into the bilateral relationship by 2012, the real rupture did not happen until Russia's intervention in Ukraine.

"The war's legacy on Georgia's security environment and its social-psychological circumstances has been more durable."

Even inside Georgia, the war's legacies are uneven. Politically and economically, it represented at most a short-term disruption of Georgia's development. In terms of democratization, the resilience of the state, and economic reform and expansion, Georgia has made more progress in the ten years since the war than it did in the almost 17 years from independence until the war. However, Russia's "borderization" activities along the South Ossetian and Abkhazian boundary

lines, and its recognition of those two regions, have created a political and legal conundrum that limits the development of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia.

The war's legacy on Georgia's security environment and its social-psychological circumstances has been more durable. With assistance from its Western partners, Georgia has made meaningful strides in its capability to defend itself. Unfortunately, Russia's offensive military capabilities have also advanced in the past decade, and Russia's stronger military position in the South Caucasus gives it advantages that it lacked in 2008. Socially and psychologically, the displacement of Georgians from their homes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the fear and intimidation campaign being waged by Russia along the boundary lines of the occupied territories, are contributing to the "nihilistic sentiment" and "constriction in the ability to think broadly and openly" that Georgians observe in their country.

Former Georgian policymaker Batu Kutelia contends that immediately after the 2008 war, the Georgian government argued that Russia's goal in invading Georgia was to challenge the Western order. Instead of writing off the war as a small conflict on the margins of Europe, many in the West now agree with this sentiment.⁷⁵ While true, it is unlikely that this view would be widespread in the West absent Russia's subsequent interventions in Ukraine and Syria, and its attempts to destabilize the

⁷⁵ Batu Kutelia, former Deputy Minister of Defense of Georgia and former Georgian Ambassador to the U.S., interview with the author (via Skype), July 11, 2018.

societies of Western states. In this way, as Kutelia says, Georgia was “the small stone that launched the avalanche.”⁷⁶ Only with the perspective offered by the ten years since the war is it possible to see it as the first step in Russia’s campaign to disrupt and possibly overturn the rules-based global order. But that is what it was.

What is to be done?

This monograph concludes with the question several 19th and early 20th century Russian authors asked in response to Russia’s political, economic, and social conditions: “Что делать?” (What is to be done)? The difference here is that we are asking this question at the global level, and in response to a situation that Russia has played a part in creating. What should the West do in response to Russia’s challenge to the rules-based global order?

First, the West should try to understand the reasons for—and the objectives of—Russia’s challenge. Is the assertiveness Russia has demonstrated since 2008 a natural result of the recovery of its military and economic power, or did the West do something to convince Russia that it had to act more resolutely defend its interests? Another way to ask this question is whether Moscow is trying to renegotiate the way the Cold War ended or pushing back against what it sees as Western failure to honor the agreements struck at that time.

The line from Moscow is that NATO’s eastward enlargement constitutes both a renegeing on the post-Cold War bargain and a grave threat to Russia’s security. Russia’s actions from 2008 forward, in this view, simply represent prudent steps to reduce that threat and defend its

interests. The problem with this argument is that NATO’s last round of enlargement to the east was in 2004, when it admitted Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. So it has been 14 years since NATO took any steps to enlarge in Russia’s direction. The 2008 NATO Summit Communique promised to admit Georgia and Ukraine to the Alliance, but took no concrete steps toward doing so. As noted earlier, the language of that communique put Moscow on notice that if it wanted to disrupt Georgia’s and Ukraine’s paths toward NATO, it had a limited time to do so. Four months after the NATO Summit, the outbreak of war in Georgia and Russia’s subsequent occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia effectively sidelined Georgia’s bid for NATO membership.

“Russia’s invasion of Georgia also had a chilling effect on Ukraine’s bid to join NATO.”

Russia’s invasion of Georgia also had a chilling effect on Ukraine’s bid to join NATO. Indeed, in 2010, Ukrainians elected the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich to the presidency, and Yanukovich promptly made it known that NATO membership was no longer a foreign policy goal for Ukraine. The fact that Russia reacted to his ouster in 2014 by occupying Crimea and fomenting war in eastern Ukraine implies that resisting NATO’s eastward enlargement was not the primary reason for Russia’s new assertiveness. After all, neither the new Ukrainian government nor NATO had proposed resurrecting Ukraine’s NATO bid before Russia acted.

However, NATO should not necessarily ignore Russian concerns, writing them off

⁷⁶ Ibid.

as more “Russian propaganda,” as some Western policymakers are apt to do. The fact that NATO does not take any action meant to threaten Russia—and it does not—does not mean that Russia perceives no threat from NATO. On the contrary, Russia routinely perceives threats in NATO actions that the Alliance does not mean to be directed at Russia. NATO enlargement is a prime example: where NATO saw enlargement as a way to stabilize Eastern Europe’s security situation and incentivize political and economic transition in post-communist states, Russia saw a hostile military alliance marching toward its borders. Having convinced itself that NATO was hostile, Moscow discounted the Alliance’s frequent assurances that its enlargement was not directed at Russia, and that indeed its doors were open to Russia should it meet the criteria for membership and choose to join. Aside from the fact that Russia believes that NATO poses a military threat, there is the fact that NATO’s enlargement to Russia’s doorstep puts a group of market democracies in proximity to its borders.

This is something that unnerves the Kremlin, since it knows that eventually the Russian people might ask why they should not have the same control over their economic and political destinies as their neighbors do. Recent polls by Russia’s Yuri Levada Center have shown a rapid fall in Putin’s approval rating, a rise in approval ratings of the EU and U.S., and a rising

sense that Russia is on the wrong track.⁷⁷

Currently, economic concerns dominate, with price increases (63%), poverty (47%), and unemployment (40%) the top concerns Russians express; limited civil rights and democratic freedoms are near the bottom of the list (5%).⁷⁸ But continued stagnant or negative economic growth as a result of Western sanctions could cause Russians to make the link between their own economic fortunes and their inability to influence their government and its decisions.

While the West should acknowledge that Russia is attempting to subvert the post-Cold War orders and take steps to resist these efforts, it must be careful not to destabilize Russia in the process. The last thing the world needs is civil unrest or outright civil war in Russia. Western policy toward Russia therefore needs to be both nuanced and adaptable. It must, for example, avoid challenging Russia’s sovereignty while resisting Russian efforts to erode the sovereignty of its neighbors. This may involve toning down Western rhetoric on political and civil rights in Russia, which many Russians see as an unwarranted interference in their country’s internal affairs. The Kremlin’s attempts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election were at least in part an attempt to exact revenge for years of

⁷⁷ “Indicators,” *Yuri Levada Analytical Center*. Internet resource at <https://www.levada.ru/eng/ratings/>, accessed August 22, 2018. According to Levada Center polls, Putin’s approval rating has fallen from 82% in April 2018 to 67% in July—a 15% drop in only three months. Approval ratings for the EU and the U.S.

both crossed into positive territory (more respondents approving than disapproving) in July 2018 for the first time since the Crimea crisis. The fall in the share of Russians agreeing that Russia is on the right track fell from 60% in April 2018 to 48% in July.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

what it saw as U.S. attempts to influence Russian elections.

This brings us back to 2008. Russia's invasion of Georgia in that year was not "a small conflict on the margins of Europe," but was indeed "the stone that launched the avalanche." It was the first step in Russia's campaign to overturn the rules-based order and replace it with an order led not by rules and principles, but by a concert of great military and economic powers. In this new order, great powers would cede to each other spheres of interest, and the smaller states lying within those would need to adjust their diplomatic, economic, and military policies accordingly.

Although Georgia recovered from the 2008 conflict quickly in most areas, and Western states and international institutions hastened to return to business as usual with Russia, the latter continued to nurse grudges and seek opportunities to express them. Moscow's subsequent actions—intervening in Ukraine and Syria, interfering in foreign elections, and attempting to destabilize Western states—are part of this campaign. If it succeeds, Georgia, Ukraine and the rest of the states located on the fault lines between great military and economic powers will lose the ability to determine their own destinies. This would be detrimental not only for the dozens of states situated on these geopolitical fault lines, but for the entire global order. After all, since the Treaty of Westphalia created the modern state system in 1648 the only consistent feature of great power concerts is that eventually they end in great power wars. 🌐





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