

# RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR OF AUGUST 2008: CLASH OF IDEOLOGIES AND NATIONAL PROJECTS IN THE ERA OF HYBRID WARFARE

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**Abstract.** The article purports that the underlying reasons behind the Russo-Georgian War that erupted in August 2008 were Georgia's aspirations to join the Western security institutions and Russia's strong opposition to such developments. The conflict is largely regarded as Russia's aggression against a neighbouring sovereign country, although flavoured with intra-Georgian ethno-political cleavages. For years, the discussion has focused on the midnight attack on August 7, executed by Georgian forces on the town of Tskhinvali, a stronghold of Ossetian separatists, violating peacekeeping accords signed back in the 1990s. The following article attempts to analyse the logic behind that risky military action taken by the Georgian government.

The article applies the concept of *hybrid warfare* that is generally understood as a combination of actions, blurring the lines between war and peace, through the engagement of special and irregular military units, diplomatic, economic and informational measures, and support for radical anti-governmental forces operating within the borders of the targeted country, creating fertile ground for conventional military intervention under the guise of peace enforcement. The author retrospectively applies this recently acknowledged concept and argues that Georgia has been under Russia's hybrid attack at least since 2006. Thus, it could be argued that then President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered the attack on Tskhinvali under the stress of the dire circumstances described in the article.

The international community, either unaware of or simply reluctant to acknowledge Russia's hybrid warfare approach, regarded Georgia's actions as disproportionate. However, today, when this form of aggression is increasingly deemed as the beginning of conventional military intervention against sovereign countries, new analytical light can be shed on the Russo-Georgian war in general, and on the events of August 7 in particular. The author purports that in that moment an all-out war could have been avoided if a) the Georgian government had surrendered; or b) if the international community had intervened in a decisive manner. However, neither was feasible.

**Keywords:** *Hybrid Warfare, Nationalism, Russia, Georgia*

## 1. Introduction to the Ideational and Hybrid Nature of the War

The title of the book by Ronald D. Asmus<sup>1</sup>, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (1997–2000), published two years after Russia's large-scale military invasion of Georgia, adequately marks the essence of the event and bears a predictive flavor. The war was indeed relatively “little”, but it “shook” the world and revealed the pattern of modern relations between the West and Russia. These relations appeared to be characterized by incompatible worldviews, reminiscent of the Cold War era: Russian leadership, as in Soviet times, seemed to perceive the U.S./EU worldwide support for democracy and human rights as a geopolitical game of the XIX century, aimed at the promotion of great power interests.

By 2008, Western diplomats, politicians and mainstream analysts were reluctant to explicitly acknowledge the incompatibility of the ideational foundations of the Russian polity with their own. Even now, after the annexation of Crimea and consequent introduction of international sanctions against Putin's regime, not everyone in the international epistemic community sees modern Russia as conceptually alien to the democratic/pluralistic worldview, underpinned by the rule of law concept. Dmitri Trenin from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace network recently remarked that “in contrast to the Cold War... the danger of... confrontation lies less in the fundamental ideological antagonism between Moscow and Washington and more in the increased likelihood of incidents”<sup>2</sup>. However, the contrast with the Cold War era may not lie in the evaporation of ideological differences between the East and the West, but in the relative weakness of the Russian Federation in comparison with the former USSR, coupled with the revisionist impulses of its current leadership. As *The Economist* declared in 2015:

*Behind Russia's confrontation with the West lies a clash of ideas. On one side are human rights, an accountable bureaucracy and democratic elections; on the other, an unconstrained state that can sacrifice its citizens' interests to further its destiny or satisfy its rulers' greed. Both under communism and*

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<sup>1</sup> **Asmus, Ronald D.** 2010. *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. [Asmus 2010]

<sup>2</sup> **Trenin, Dmitri V.** 2018. *The Disruptor*. Carnegie Moscow Center, 16 February 2018. <<http://carnegie.ru/2018/02/16/disruptor-pub-75565>>.

*before it, the Russian state acquired religious attributes. It is this sacred state which is under threat.*<sup>3</sup>

According to the article in *The Economist*, even Stalinist Russia, whose habits championed the Cold War, was not so much about communism, but the state's dominance over all spheres of life. In this respect, Putin's vision that Russia has always been a state civilization<sup>4</sup> does not fall too far from the Stalinist vision of polity, despite the more totalitarian and bloodier implementation tactics of the latter.

The Russian attack on Ukraine and the land grab committed there was a wake-up call for the West, leading to sanctions, as well as the above-mentioned articles in popular magazines. However, Russia's overtly anti-Western and illegal moves on the international arena started much earlier and the Georgian case is indicative of that, at least in retrospect. As the first military conflict between the members of the Council of Europe since the Cold War, the Russo-Georgian war was the forefront case of the arrival of the so-called hybrid warfare phenomenon on the European continent.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the April 2007 riots in Tallinn, which were accompanied by an attack

<sup>3</sup> **What Russia Wants: From Cold War to Hot War.** – *The Economist*, 12 February 2015. <<https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21643220-russias-aggression-ukraine-part-broader-and-more-dangerous-confrontation>>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Hybrid warfare, conflict or threat has been the topic of military/strategic analysis for years, dating back to the Israeli-Hezbollah confrontation in 2006 in Lebanon. After the tragic developments in Ukraine in 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula and fighting erupted in the Donbas, this concept was popularised by international political-diplomatic and academic circles. At the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO member states directly addressed the “specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats, where a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures are employed in a highly integrated design”. According to the 2015 Munich Security Report, in its full measure hybrid warfare entails the combination of regular, irregular and special forces in combination with the support for local unrest; diplomacy, propaganda and information warfare; economic warfare and cyberattacks. See: **Munich Security Report** 2015. <[https://www.securityconference.de/fileadmin/MunichSecurityReport/MunichSecurityReport\\_2015.pdf](https://www.securityconference.de/fileadmin/MunichSecurityReport/MunichSecurityReport_2015.pdf)>.

In retrospect, if we look at the developments in Georgian conflict zones prior to and during the Russo-Georgian military confrontation in 2008, we can easily notice all those elements of hybrid war, which later manifested themselves in Ukraine and caused the international community to produce the above-mentioned assumptions. For instance, in 2016, Shota Gvineria compiled an article concerning the array of combined hostile methods employed by Russia against Georgian territorial integrity and sovereignty, including expert assessments that “the cases of Georgia and Ukraine are interrelated since the weak Western response to the Russian aggression in Georgia clearly encouraged Russia to act similarly in Ukraine”. **Gvineria, Shota** (Amb.) 2017. Information Warfare as Russia's Hybrid Warfare Tool. – *Information Warfare – New*

on Estonian communication systems and a Russian-led disinformation campaign, yet fell short of military intervention, the August 2008 war showed the full potential of this phenomenon, encompassing informational, irregular and conventional military operations, resulting in the occupation of vast territories by the Russian army. Of course, the war did not come out of the blue – any war has its pre-history and time of maturation. For Ronald Asmus, the bottom line was the Russo-Western competition for the souls of the newly emancipated post-Soviet nations: in this case, Georgia wanted to go to the West and Russia wanted to stop it.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, while former USSR national republics “going to the West” can be regarded as the core reason behind Russia’s anti-Western/anti-neighborhood sentiment, the war story is deeper and more multifaceted. The overt clash between Georgian and Russian militaries, as a corollary of long-standing hybrid confrontation, is embedded not only in Russian imperial narrative, but also in Georgian, as well as in separatist Ossetian and Abkhaz projects of a local nation-building nature. These very narratives and deeds of local nationalisms, which allowed Russians to wear peacekeeper helmets from the 1990s until 2008, obscured the reality on the ground for many international observers and gave Russia fertile ground for its hybrid warfare tactics and strategy.

## 2. When and by Whom Was the War Started?

Together with Russia, Georgia received its share of blame in the 2009 report by the EU-sponsored Independent International Fact Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. However, local dynamics must also be taken into account in assessing the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. However, the argument put forward by Ronald Asmus overshadows every other logic, interests or projects. While federalist and separatist forces inside Georgia did have their own ambitions and/or radicalism for years, if not for Russia’s claim to be the only arbiter in post-Soviet space, and Western bewilderment to openly challenge this, Georgia’s internal cleavages may have been negotiated by the international community much more profoundly and peacefully.

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Security Challenge for Europe. Ed. by Tomáš Čížik. Bratislava: Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs (CENAA), p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State **Ronald D. Asmus**. – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 6, 2009. <[https://www.rferl.org/a/Former\\_US\\_Diplomat\\_Chances\\_Of\\_Another\\_RussiaGeorgia\\_Conflict\\_Cant\\_Be\\_Ruled\\_Out/1844989.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Former_US_Diplomat_Chances_Of_Another_RussiaGeorgia_Conflict_Cant_Be_Ruled_Out/1844989.html)>.

Thus, Asmus' image of Georgia as a victim, punished by Russia for looking towards the West in the hope for modernization, is grounded in fact.

In April 2005, in his state of the nation address, Vladimir Putin called the dissolution of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This statement was made against a backdrop of rising Western criticism concerning the authoritarian tendencies in post-Yeltsin Russia. Putin expressed irritation with such criticism, mentioning in the same speech that Russia “will decide for itself the pace, terms and conditions of moving towards democracy”.<sup>7</sup> One should hardly be surprised that such statements caused increased apprehension for Georgia's new pro-NATO revolutionary leadership concerning the revisionist nature of Putin's Russia.

The next two events on the European scale, marking rising tensions between the West and Russia and contributing to the drastic deterioration of the situation in and around Georgian conflict zones, were the Russian reaction to Kosovo's independence and NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit. During a press conference on February 14, 2008, Putin stated that the territorial integrity of Serbia had to be respected and warned the international community that he was going to react to Kosovo's independence in the form of some peculiar housekeeping.<sup>8</sup> In April 2008, Putin attended the NATO-Russia Council meeting in Bucharest. It was a side event during the Alliance's biennial summit and Putin's personal participation would have hardly been expected, if not for his intention to settle scores with the Bush administration on two issues: the prospects of the U.S. missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as the prospect of NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia.

Unlike his previous statements, including his famous Munich Speech of February 2007, described by the NATO Secretary General as “disappointing and not helpful”,<sup>9</sup> Putin's wording at the press conference in Bucharest was unexpectedly calibrated. Secretary General Scheffer mentioned that the Russian president was not confrontational and expressed readiness for compromise, while making his disagreement on anti-missile and NATO expansion

<sup>7</sup> See: **Putin deplures collapse of USSR**. – BBC News, 25 April 2005. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4480745.stm>>.

<sup>8</sup> **Путин: у нас есть домашние заготовки на случай признания независимости Косова**. – Vesti.ru. <<https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=163610>>.

<sup>9</sup> At the Munich Annual Security Conference, Putin brushed off questions about Russia's commitment to democracy and accused the US of attempts to build a unipolar world. See: **Watson, Roy** 2007. **Putin's speech: Back to Cold War?** – BBC News, 10 February 2007. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6350847.stm>>.

issues known.<sup>10</sup> Putin said that the decision of the Summit that one day Georgia and Ukraine would become NATO members was a threat to Russia. However, he was nothing but pleased that the alliance rejected the suggestion of the Americans to grant those countries a membership action plan, which would have indicated qualitative success in their quest for Euro-Atlantic integration.

According to Dmitri Trenin, NATO's refusal to give Ukraine and Georgia membership action plans gave Russia a sense of victory, but the promise of membership in the future, written in the final declaration "placated no one... Both Moscow and Tbilisi saw the Bucharest decision as a shaky truce, unlikely to last long".<sup>11</sup>

Trenin concludes that from this decision to compromise, the war of nerves between Georgia and Russia ensued and Georgia was the first to jump the gun.<sup>12</sup> Referring to the midnight attack on August 7 by Georgian troops on the strongholds of separatists in the South Ossetian conflict zone, Trenin admits that it was preceded by reciprocal exchanges of fire.

In fact, all the landmark events of European security outlined above not only showed the revisionist rhetoric of the Russian political elite, but were accompanied by practical decisions and steps, directly deepening the precariousness of Georgian statehood. A few days after his statement concerning the unacceptability of Kosovo's independence and Russia's readiness to reciprocate, Putin warned Georgian leadership that he was going to retaliate against the West at the expense of Georgia – namely with regard to its breakaway regions where Russia had a formal peacekeeping role since the early 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Soon after, Moscow's intentions became clear: in April, Putin ordered direct relations between his government and Abkhazian and Ossetian separatist authorities. Overt Russian economic and military assistance started arriving on Georgian soil, bypassing its legal-institutional procedures. The Georgian government declared that these developments equaled

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<sup>10</sup> **Erlanger, Steven** 2008. Putin at NATO Meeting Curbs Combative Rhetoric. – The New York Times, April 5, 2008.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/05/world/europe/05nato.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> **Trenin, Dmitri V.** 2011. *Posts-Imperium: A Eurasian Story*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 28.  
<<http://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/book/post-imperium.pdf>>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> **Illarionov, Andrey** 2009. Kak gotovilas voyna. – Novaya Gazeta, June 29.  
<<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2009/06/28/42316-kak-gotovilas-voyna>>. [**Illarionov** 2009]

the formal annexation of its territories.<sup>14</sup> In addition, skirmishes in the South Ossetian conflict zone and the violation of Georgian airspace by Russian air forces were becoming a common occurrence.

Even in the years before the escalation of the conflict, the situation in the Georgian conflict zones was never managed through purely peacekeeping structures and intentions. According to international, as well as Russian sources, Russian officials used to distribute Russian passports among the inhabitants of separatist enclaves *en masse*. This would have been a pretext for Russia, at their convenience, to claim the right of their military protection. For that purpose, military units and equipment, exceeding peacekeeping quotas and objectives, were deployed much earlier than Kosovo's independence or NATO's Bucharest Summit. For instance, the Tochka-U short range ballistic missiles battalion, which bombed the Georgian sea port of Poti in the middle of the night on August 8–9, 2008, was secretly brought to Abkhazia back in the autumn of 2007.<sup>15</sup> But the spring-summer of 2008 marked a change: Russian war and/or *de facto* annexation preparations were made explicit. In July 2008, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs openly admitted the violation of Georgian airspace by Russian jets, explaining it by the desire to “calm the hot heads”.<sup>16</sup>

According to Putin's former economic policy advisor Andrey Illarionov's account of the events, from the end of April until the end of July 2008, a low intensity war was taking place on Georgian soil.<sup>17</sup> One can also argue that by that time all the elements of hybrid warfare conducted by Russian political and security agencies against Georgia were in full swing. Apart from fueling separatist sentiments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia through military and economic assistance, as well as covert increase of Russian troops in Georgian conflict zones, Russia also employed a variety of methods of diplomatic, political, military, economic and informational pressure.

Yet some analysts somewhat controversially conclude that although Russian political leadership may have aimed to intimidate Georgia for

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> **Barabanov, M. S.; Lavrov, A. V.; Tseluiko, V. A.** 2010. Tanks of August. Ed. by Ruslan Pukhov. Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, p. 64. <[http://www.cast.ru/files/The\\_Tanks\\_of\\_August\\_sm\\_eng.pdf](http://www.cast.ru/files/The_Tanks_of_August_sm_eng.pdf)>. [**Tanks of August** 2010]

<sup>16</sup> **Illarionov** 2009.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

various national/regional purposes, they were hardly planning a war.<sup>18</sup> According to Brian Ellison, Russian civil-military command and decision-making did not leave the impression of strategic war-planning. It was erratic, pragmatically responding “to the unfolding of events, either by Georgia or by Russian military brinksmanship”.<sup>19</sup> Of course, if one forgets the concepts of low intensity and hybrid warfare and sticks to only classic definitions/declarations of military hostilities, the strategic picture becomes blurred. The Russian large-scale invasion of Georgia from different directions, which started on August 8 after Georgian troops launched an attack on the town of Tskhinvali, would appear to be just a response – if not peace enforcement in its proper sense, than merely an overreaction. That is exactly what the Russian leadership wanted to achieve on the international information front, accusing Georgian leadership of violating all peace arrangements, attacking Russian peacekeepers etc. One has to admit that Russia partially succeeded in this respect: on September 1, 2008, the extraordinary meeting of the European Council of the EU concluded that it was “gravely concerned by the open conflict which has broken out in Georgia, by the resulting violence and by the disproportionate reaction of Russia”.<sup>20</sup> However, the reality on the ground was somewhat different: Russia was not just reacting to the unfolding events, but channeling them in a premeditated direction.

Firstly, the erratic nature of supreme Russian decision-making is not an argument against its hostile and militant intentions. Secondly, as the recent RAND Corporation report<sup>21</sup> outlines, Russian tactics of hybrid war, including information campaigns and activation of proxy and elite special units, obfuscate the boundaries between war and peace. Similarly to the takeover of the Crimean peninsula, these tactics were used against Georgia prior to open warfare in 2008. According to the report, Russian hybrid tactics in some cases serve as a preparation of the pretext for all-out war. They are reminiscent of so-called “active measures” – a set of subversive actions of the USSR

<sup>18</sup> **Ellison, Brian J.** 2011. Russian Grand Strategy in the South Ossetia War. – *Demokrati-zatsiya*, Fall 2011, Vol. 19, Issue 4, pp. 343–366. <[https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2015/MVZ208/um/59326197/Ellison\\_Russian\\_Grand\\_Strategy.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2015/MVZ208/um/59326197/Ellison_Russian_Grand_Strategy.pdf)>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>20</sup> **Extraordinary European Council.** Brussels, 1 September, 2008. Presidency Conclusions. <[http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/102545.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/102545.pdf)>.

<sup>21</sup> **Chivvis, Christopher S.** 2017. Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare” And What Can Be Done About It. – RAND Testimonies, CT-468. <[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND\\_CT468.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND_CT468.pdf)>. [Chivvis 2017]



special services employed internationally. RAND experts claim that Russia returned to these methods after democratic color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004.<sup>22</sup>

In 2009, the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom also produced an assessment of the five-day Russo-Georgian war. Although critical of the Georgian government and citing recklessness in its pre-war actions/attitudes, the paper nevertheless sees the logic of the Russo-Georgian clash in Russian subversive tactics of deception, disinformation and usage of agent provocateurs, that were aimed to mislead, entrap and control the opponent.<sup>23</sup>

One particular example of hybrid warfare, which can be identified retrospectively,<sup>24</sup> was the role assigned to Russian peacekeepers in the conflict zones. Initiating an attack on Russian peacekeepers, stationed in the conflict zone legally, would put an unequivocal blame of aggression on the Georgian side. Georgian authorities were obviously aware of that, issuing orders not to engage “unless they opened fire”.<sup>25</sup> Thus, provoking Georgian troops to shoot at peacekeepers’ positions and reporting the casualties would have been an efficient entrapment tactic from the Russian side. That is exactly what happened. Of course, the Georgian side claims that Russian peacekeepers were allowing Ossetian militia to use “their base in Tskhinvali as a firing position and Russian peacekeepers were engaged in fire correction operations, passing locations of targets back to the South Ossetian militias”.<sup>26</sup> Russian officials have strongly denied that. Whatever the truth, which was not substantiated by the EU fact finding mission, Ronald Asmus reveals in his book that the Russian foreign ministry raised the alarm about the casualties among Russian peacekeepers three hours before the first casualty actually occurred. For Asmus, that is “an additional piece of evidence that suggests that the war – including its rationale – may have been preplanned”.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> [Chivvis 2017]

<sup>23</sup> Blandy, C. W. 2009. Provocation, Deception, Entrapment: The Russo-Georgian Five Day War. – Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Caucasus Series, 09/01, March 2009. Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. <[https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/97421/09\\_january\\_georgia\\_russia.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/97421/09_january_georgia_russia.pdf)>.

<sup>24</sup> I argue that this term widely entered the international analysis of Russian actions *vis-à-vis* its neighbors and beyond only in 2013–2014, although the phenomenon had emerged much earlier.

<sup>25</sup> Defence Minister Testifies Before War Commission. – Civil.ge, 28 November 2008. <<http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20036&search=>>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Asmus 2010, p. 45.

In wars, the truth always depends on efficient propaganda and diplomacy, as much as the outcome in battles is defined by the numbers and morale of troops. In the age of hybrid encounters, dissemination and manipulation of information have acquired paramount importance, with the Russo-Georgian war being no exception. According to Paul Goble, this war “remains first and foremost an information war, in which victories and defeats in that sphere were in many ways more important and fateful than those which took place on the ground”.<sup>28</sup> For a small country like Georgia it was no less difficult to face these virtual battles, than to confront experienced Russian troops on the battlefield.

The main contested issue was the blame game regarding the start of large-scale military actions, which were seen as unjustifiable and disproportionate. The Georgian version of the events was very simple: for years, Russia had been undermining Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity as safeguarded by international law. In addition to that, mercenaries from Russia, as well as extra troops having nothing to do with legally deployed peacekeepers, had entered Georgian territory and were advancing on Georgian positions prior to the Georgian attack. In fact, according to the narrative of Saakashvili’s government, by attacking the town of Tskhinvali in the conflict zone in the middle of the night on August 7, Georgian forces were acting in self-defence. Ronald Asmus brings out the full array of arguments in support of this narrative and assumes that while “the fog of war was already setting in,” making the scale of the Russian and separatist actions unclear, the Georgian operation was largely self-defensive.<sup>29</sup>

Rather unexpectedly, Thomas de Waal, who was one of the outspoken British critics of the Georgian government from 2004 to 2012, due to its democratic as well as nationalistic record, also finds a reason for Georgian war actions. On the one hand, he questions the existence of a substantial Russian military movement, as well as the fact of the shelling of Georgian villages prior to the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali. In his view, after weeks of skirmishes, Saakashvili decided to capture the capital of Ossetian separatists out of nationalist sentiments, though de Waal admits that it is very likely that the Russians might have been preparing an operation of their own

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<sup>28</sup> **Goble, Paul A.** 2009. *Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russians and Georgians*. – *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia*. Ed. by Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr. (Studies of Central Asia and Caucasus). New York, London: Routledge, p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> **Asmus** 2010, pp. 39–40.

and Saakashvili was acting under threats and provocations on the ground. According to de Waal, “in this small, multiethnic patch of land [*Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone, D.D.*], ethnic Georgian and Ossetian villages adjoined one another in a complex jigsaw puzzle. The severing of a road here or a new roadblock there threatened encirclement or expulsion for one community or the other. Saakashvili took the gamble”.<sup>30</sup>

While these expert assessments are attempts at objective analysis, at the same time, they bear the imprint of the Russo-Georgian information war mentioned above. The Russian diplomatic corps, as well as pro-governmental media outlets, information agencies and social blogs were intensively spreading the image of sleeping peaceful Ossetian towns and villages falling under surprise attack by Georgian forces, forcing Russian troops to assume the role of peace enforcers. Russian and Ossetian media as well as Facebook sources were also falsely reporting about genocidal actions of Georgian soldiers. It served the Russian objective to justify its military actions based on the Responsibility to Protect principle unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and laid out in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document.<sup>31</sup> It did not work: Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov’s interview with the BBC on August 9, 2008, where he attempted to disguise Russia’s military actions against Georgia in the UN language, was later substantially refuted by Gareth Evans, one of the proponents of the “Responsibility to Protect” principle.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the Georgian large-scale midnight attack on Tskhinvali on August 7 was probably the most promising ground for Russian propaganda to stand upon. The Georgian argument against being accused of the disproportional nature of its military action was based on intelligence reports indicating that a large column of Russian troops had entered Georgian territory from the Russo-Georgian border tunnel of Roki in support of Ossetian militiamen and was heading south towards Georgian villages located beyond Tskhinvali. Most importantly, those villages, namely Kurta and Tamarasheni, were under the control of mixed Georgian-Ossetian autonomous administration, created recently and loyal to Georgian authorities. Thus, according to the

<sup>30</sup> **Waal, Thomas de** 2010. Missiles Over Tskhinvali. – The National Interest (online), 20 April. <<http://nationalinterest.org/bookreview/missiles-over-tskhinvali-3449>>.

<sup>31</sup> Paragraphs 138–139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document adopted by the United Nations General Assembly resolution (A/RES/60/1) on 16 September 2005. <<http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.html>>

<sup>32</sup> **Evans, Gareth** 2009. Russia, Georgia and Responsibility to Protect. – Amsterdam Law Forum, Vol. 1, No. 2. <<http://amsterdamlawforum.org/article/view/58/115>>.

Georgian evaluation of the events on the ground, the loss of these territories to Russian/Ossetian forces could have meant the loss of the power base of Saakashvili's government in the Ossetian-Georgian conflict zone. According to Saakashvili's testimony to the special commission of the Georgian parliament, that was the reason he gave the order to stop the Russian advance and save the lives of civilians. He argued that without entering Tskhinvali, rescuing the villagers would have been impossible.<sup>33</sup>

A *New York Times* article from September 16, 2008, relied on the U.S. intelligence assessment and supported the Georgian claim that a Russian column was heading towards Georgian villages.<sup>34</sup> It was very helpful for the Georgian cause in the ongoing information warfare. Only after this article did Russian officials start admitting the existence of this column, although they claimed that it was an enforcement of peacekeepers on the ground. But the reputation of the Georgian government remained at risk: as *The Economist* wrote about the contradicting Georgian and Russian accounts regarding the start of conventional military operations, "the truth is somewhere in between" and Saakashvili's order to advance on Tskhinvali "played into the enemy's hand".<sup>35</sup>

The fact is that while indicating Russia as the aggressor on many accounts, the fifth paragraph of the resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the consequences of the war between Georgia and Russia, states that the "initiation of shelling of Tskhinvali without warning by the Georgian military...marked a new level of escalation"<sup>36</sup>. Later, the report of the EU sponsored fact-finding mission reiterated contradictions regarding the start of the war, accusing Russia of numerous violations of Georgian sovereignty and the 1992–1994 peace accords, and not substantiating the criminality of Georgian attack on Russian peacekeepers.

<sup>33</sup> See: <<https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=20112>>. According to the temporary Commission of the Georgian Parliament on the issue of Russian military aggression and other actions aimed at undermining the territorial integrity of Georgia, Saakashvili's order read as follows: Halt the Russian advance on Georgian territory; suppress the fire targeted at Georgian villages in the region; provide security for the population. See:

<[http://intranet.parliament.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=GEO&sec\\_id=1329&info\\_id=22127](http://intranet.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=1329&info_id=22127)>.

<sup>34</sup> Chivers, C. J. et al. 2008. Georgia Offers Fresh Evidence on War's Start. – *The New York Times*, September 16.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/16/world/europe/16georgia.html>>.

<sup>35</sup> **The Fog of War. Unravelling the Ossetia Conflict, One Year Later.** – *The Economist*, 13 August 2009. <<https://www.economist.com/node/14209458>>.

<sup>36</sup> **Council of Europe** 2008. Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 1633 on the Consequences of the War between Georgia and Russia, 2 October, 2008. <<http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17681&lang=en>>.

At the same time, the mission did not agree with Georgian claims of ongoing large-scale Russian invasion on August 7 and declared that combatting the Ossetian low-scale attacks that had been going on for days did not require an attack on Tskhinvali.<sup>37</sup> As the main argument against Saakashvili's purely defensive intentions, the mission cited a rather controversial TV statement by Georgian general Mamuka Kurashvili, commander of the Georgian peacekeepers in the conflict zone prior to the outbreak of large-scale hostilities.<sup>38</sup> On the night of August 7, he declared that Georgia was conducting the operation for the restoration of constitutional order. Later, Georgian authorities refuted this statement as the unauthorized opinion of an officer under battle stress. Kurashvili himself explained that he was confused when journalists found him near the battlefield for an interview. However, the political damage had already been done and the interview was heavily used by the adversary as a bargaining chip in the information warfare.

The Kurashvili affair calls for a temporal analytical distancing from purely military actions and the legal context of the Russo-Georgian standoff, and a return to the ideological underpinnings of the war. While the Russian rationale for infringing on Georgian sovereignty was a desire for maintenance/restoration of the geopolitical zones of influence in the post-Soviet space, neither the Georgian political class, nor separatist-minded Ossetians were lacking their share of nationalist visionaries.

In Soviet times, if not earlier, Ossetian educated circles were developing historical narratives linking their ancestors with ancient Scythians, claiming that not only the territory of the South Ossetian autonomous district, but other parts of Georgia, including the Abkhazian autonomous republic, had a footprint of Scythian-Ossetian origins in their toponyms and hydronyms.<sup>39</sup> Many Georgian scholars representing the titular nation of the Georgian

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<sup>37</sup> **Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. Report.** September 2009, Volume II, pp. 248–251. <[http://www.cellg.ch/pdf/IIFFMIG\\_volume\\_II.pdf](http://www.cellg.ch/pdf/IIFFMIG_volume_II.pdf)>.

<sup>38</sup> According to the 1992 ceasefire agreement, a tripartite peacekeeping force of Russian, Georgian and Ossetian battalions were deployed in the South Ossetian conflict zone prior to the 2008 war.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, the academic works of **Chochiev, Alan** 1989. Социальная история осетин в догосударственный период. <<http://www.dissercat.com/content/sotsialnaya-istoriya-osetin-v-dogosudarstvennyi-period>>. He was an Ossetian ethnographer, who later became one of the leaders of the Ossetian independence movement, challenging from the late 1980s the territorial integrity of the Georgian state. Abkhazians had their own historically flavored pretensions, articulated, among others, by historian Vladislav Ardzinba, who later became the first *de facto* president of the unrecognized Abkhazian independent republic.

Soviet Socialist Republic strongly disagreed, perceiving these lands as the cradle of the Georgian ethnic nation and none other. These mythologies eventually manifested themselves in mutually exclusive political projects.

Saakashvili's government, which assumed power in Georgia through the peaceful Rose Revolution<sup>40</sup> in 2003, distanced itself from the ethnic nationalisms of the 1980s and 1990s, which caused animosities between Georgian national groups and created fertile ground for Moscow to continue its divide and rule policies after the demise of the USSR. President Saakashvili was the first among modern Georgian statesmen who declared that for those Georgians who have problems with Ossetians or other minorities, he would be Ossetian etc. But it does not mean that he or others in the Georgian political class were not desperate for the restoration of the territorial integrity of the state, violated after the collapse of the Soviet Union and unleashed turmoil of 1991–1994. In the summer of 2004, Saakashvili made a failed attempt to change the *status quo* in South Ossetia through different law enforcement measures. While having a pretext, since Ossetian leadership was exposing renewed brinkmanship, the Georgian responses of 2004 were not immune to a certain revolutionary hot-headedness either. In 2006, Saakashvili created a pro-Georgian autonomous administration of South Ossetia, attracting some former separatist activists to his side. While this idea could have been regarded as a rational strategy for attracting the moderate part of the Ossetian society, the supervision of this project was handed to security officers, causing the international community to doubt its authenticity.

That is all generally explainable by the frustration of the new Georgian authorities under Saakashvili, who came to power with the hope and promise to modernize the failing Georgian state, infected by systemic corruption and lawlessness. Conflict zones under the oversight of Russian peacekeepers, whom one Georgian diplomat eloquently named “keepers of pieces” of the former empire, were hardly compatible with the state-building project. However, Russia had no desire to accept Georgia's modernization project, nor was the international community ready to acknowledge Russian hybrid threats at that time and act accordingly. It came only later, when the so-called

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<sup>40</sup> According to international, and also local civil society reports, the parliamentary elections of November 2, 2003, were substantially rigged. It caused massive protests and on November 23, supporters of the democratic pro-Western opposition, led by Michael Saakashvili, occupied the parliament. To demonstrate the peaceful nature of the protests, they waved roses. Subsequently, president Shevardnadze was forced to resign.

Gerasimov Doctrine of 2013<sup>41</sup> resonated, and Russia annexed Crimea, that the West substantially re-evaluated its attitude towards Putin's regime.

A day prior to the Georgian midnight attack, the media reported that the leader of the Ossetian separatists, Eduard Kokoity, declared his intention to "clean out" Georgian villages in the conflict zone.<sup>42</sup> At that time Russian military was represented in the separatist government, in addition to their peacekeeping duties in the region.<sup>43</sup> Kokoity himself had a permanent telephone hot-line with the Kremlin. However, the 2009 EU fact-finding mission failed to speak unequivocally on Russia's direct responsibility for the escalation of hostilities, stating that the mission was not in a position to define the degree of "effective control" the Russians had over Ossetian forces and their behavior.<sup>44</sup> The publication of the mission report coincided with the changes in the U.S. administration and its consequent plans to reset the soured relations with Russia for the better. According analyst David Smith who summarized Western responses to Georgian calamities, Russia (and others) might have perceived that the West would tolerate aggression as long as it could rationalize that an attack is not "large-scale".<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> In February 2013, the head of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, published an article addressing the changing nature of war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gerasimov accused the West of masterminding and supporting the so-called "Arab Spring" processes in the Middle East, and portrayed it as asymmetric warfare, characterized by the absence of a declaration of war, information manipulation, and covert and overt military support for the armed opposition. According to Gerasimov, Russia faced the risk of similar hostile actions and should be ready for that. Within the context of the Ukrainian crisis of 2013–2014 and recollections of the Russo-Georgian war events, Western analysts saw Gerasimov's vision as a blueprint for what Russian military-political circles were planning and doing themselves in neighboring countries, giving fresh impetus to the hybrid war/hybrid threat discussions. For more on the so-called Gerasimov doctrine and its interpretations, see: **Герасимов, Валерий** 2013. Ценность науки в предвиденн. – ВПК, 23 февраля 2013. <<https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14832>> [**Герасимов** 2013]; **Chivvis** 2017; **Monaghan, Andrew** 2016. Putin's Way of War. The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'. – *Parameters*, Vol. 45(4), Winter 2015–16. <[http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/Winter\\_2015-16/9\\_Monaghan.pdf](http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/Winter_2015-16/9_Monaghan.pdf)>.

<sup>42</sup> **Asmus** 2010, pp. 26–28. Asmus indicates the following informational source: Press release. Ministry of Press and Mass Media of the Republic of South Ossetia and the RES Information Agency, 7 August, 2008. <<http://cominf.org/node/1166477896>>.

<sup>43</sup> For instance, Russian colonel Anatoly Barankevich was in charge of Kokoity's Security Council.

<sup>44</sup> **Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. Report.** September 2009, Volume I, pp. 258–261. <[http://www.cellg.ch/pdf/IIFFMIG\\_volume\\_I.pdf](http://www.cellg.ch/pdf/IIFFMIG_volume_I.pdf)>.

<sup>45</sup> **Smith, David J.** 2009. The Russia-Georgia Conflict: An Invasion by Any Other Name. – 24 Saati Newspaper, October 7, 2009. See: <<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-russiageorgia-conflict-an-invasion-by-any-other-name>>.

### 3. Back to the Hybrid Pretexts and Context of the Russo-Georgian War

If one takes the above-mentioned “Gerasimov Doctrine” as Russia’s understanding of 21<sup>st</sup> century war methodology, it can be seen that so-called “non-linear” warfare (Russian version of the notion of “hybrid” D.D.) includes economic and diplomatic pressure, support for radical opposition and capitalizing on the protest potential within the population of the target country. Military operations, under the guise of peacekeeping/peace enforcement, are only a corollary of all this.<sup>46</sup> That is exactly what worried the Georgian government not only in conflict zones, but most of all, in the capital of Georgia as early as 2006. That year Georgia experienced gas cuts, a wine export ban, and forceful expulsions of expatriates from Russia. The same year, Georgian police arrested a handful of Russian security officers accused of spying and some Georgian anti-governmental activists linked to Igor Giorgadze, former Georgian Minister of Security and an officer of the KGB, who took refuge in Russia in 1995.

2007 was a critical year for Saakashvili: the capital city of Tbilisi turned oppositional. Back in 2006, the abduction of a young bank employee, Sandro Girgvliani, by police officers for insulting a particular elite company in a restaurant, ended with him being found dead in the forest. Although it had happened the year before, the media, political parties and NGOs, which for various reasons disliked Saakashvili’s revolutionary government, relied on this tragedy to mobilize the protest electorate. Of course, inadequate prosecution of the case, revolutionary arrogance in relations with the judiciary, as well as the social costs of many reforms, associated with massive layoffs in the public sector, created fertile ground for public disillusionment in the “Beacon of Liberty”.<sup>47</sup> Although, retrospectively speaking, the anti-governmental protests, culminating in mass disorder in November 2007, bore the elements of hybrid warfare used by Russia against Georgia.

Unlike in Ukraine or in some other post-Soviet countries, the Russian minority in Georgia was too insignificant for the Kremlin to rely upon. Hence, Russian experts of “non-linear” warfare needed other social forces to challenge Saakashvili’s hold on power. For the most part they focused on

<sup>46</sup> Герасимов 2013; see also: Доктрина Герасимова. <<https://ru.wikipedia.org>>.

<sup>47</sup> To quote George W. Bush praising Georgian reforms while visiting the country in May 2005. **Bush praises Georgian democracy.** – BBC News, 10 May, 2005. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4531273.stm>>.



Ossetian and Abkhazian ethnic nationalists, who had their own reading of history, challenging Georgian territorial integrity. In addition, Saakashvili had managed to alienate three other powerful social camps, directly linked with each other and with possible allies in the Kremlin. These were the descendants of the former communist elite, organized crime and the Orthodox Church.

Of course, not all representatives of those social groups were protesting against Saakashvili or had special links to the Russian state. The reasons seem to lay in the fact that, as mentioned above, certain internal policies enraged large segments of the society that were formerly supportive of the Rose Revolution.<sup>48</sup> It caused anger among no less pro-Western civil society organizations. However, it did not change much in the perception of the then Georgian government that Russia was, at minimum, capitalizing on these developments in a hybrid/non-linear style. And Saakashvili, while gradually developing a siege mentality, had arguments in support of this perception.

The main actor in the mobilization of the anti-government movement was the TV channel Imedi and its owner, billionaire Badri Patarkatsishvili. He made his fortune in Moscow in the turbulent 1990s: along with other businesses, he was also active in the local media scene. Patarkatsishvili invited Russian experts to TV Imedi in order to create virtual reality for political purposes.<sup>49</sup> After protesters clashed with riot police on November 7, 2007, Saakashvili had to resign and announce early presidential elections. That was understandable, considering the excessive use of force by the police, especially in the raid on TV Imedi, which caused mass criticism internationally. In January 2008, Saakashvili was re-elected with a slight margin, albeit losing the elections in the capital. One particularly revealing incident, concerning the nature and intentions of the opposition's leadership, was investigated, covertly filmed and publicly broadcasted by the Georgian

<sup>48</sup> On the uneven human rights and rule of law record of Saakashvili's otherwise genuinely pro-NATO and pro-EU government see for instance: **Nodia, Ghia** 2009. Georgian President's Record Mixed When Judged Against Ambitious Goals. – RadioFreeEurope. RadioLiberty, January 24, 2009. <[https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgian\\_Presidents\\_Record\\_Mixed\\_When\\_Judged\\_Against\\_Ambitious\\_Goals/1374287.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgian_Presidents_Record_Mixed_When_Judged_Against_Ambitious_Goals/1374287.html)>.

<sup>49</sup> On Patarkatsishvili's participation in creating the Russian media empire of the 1990s, employing high ranking security servicemen, see **Wilson, Andrew** 2005. Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World. Yale University Press, pp. 8–32; **On Russian consultants participating in media war with Saakashvili from Imedi TV**. Interview with Oleg Panphilov, Director of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, December 2009.

police: on the eve of the elections, Patarkatsishvili was caught negotiating with a high-ranking Georgian police officer to assist him in rigging the elections and “neutralizing” the Minister of the Interior. Patarkatsishvili did not deny the occurrence of such a conversation.

It is also noteworthy that protesters in the streets were demanding amnesty for prisoners jailed through the process of Saakashvili’s anti-criminal campaign.<sup>50</sup> It was causing excitement among the prison population, which had recently rioted under the guidance of professional criminals, adding more troubles to the Georgian state-building process. At the same time, many representatives of Georgian organized crime were entrenched in Russia. One can easily guess on which side their sympathies were.

In summary, it can be concluded that a few months prior to open clashes with the Russian army in the conflict zones, Saakashvili’s government faced an internal front line, mainly based in the capital city. It would hardly be logical to isolate these two developments. However, taken at face value, neither the anti-Saakashvili standing of the Georgian underworld, nor Patarkatsishvili’s criminal intentions and Russian connections can be regarded as direct proof of a Russian plot against Georgia. Thus, until Russian security archives open, the context must be analyzed, as well as certain pieces of information about later developments, in order to find the hidden “Russian hand” behind everything that transpired. Applied retrospectively, they add to the understanding of the hybrid overtones of the Russo-Georgian warfare prior to and after the midnight attack to Tskhinvali.

The August war boosted national unity and dissuaded the opposition from further protests for the time being. However, the political pressure on the Georgian government began to increase again in 2009, leading to new street clashes in Tbilisi in the spring of 2011. By that time, facts had been brought to light at the international level regarding the involvement of professional criminals in Georgian politics, and the cooperation of Russian security services with the Georgian underworld and certain political circles in Georgia:

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<sup>50</sup> The statement of Saakashvilis’ predecessor Eduard Shevardnadze that “thieves in law (the title of Soviet/post-Soviet mafia bosses, D. D.) had eaten the country” (Slade, Gavin 2010. Georgia’s Mafia: The politics of survival. – openDemocracy.net, 21 August 2010. <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/gavin-slade/georgia%E2%80%99s-mafia-politics-of-survival>> [Slade 2010]) was indicative in this respect. Saakashvili launched a campaign of zero tolerance against crime. In 2005, the law made belonging to the mafia world a criminal offence even without being charged with a particular crime.

1. A report by the Austrian police concerning the Georgian mafia in Austria indicated that part of the Georgian political opposition might have been subsidized by foreign foreign-based criminal networks;<sup>51</sup>
2. According to a Spanish investigator of Russian mafia activity, Moscow's strategy appeared to use "organized crime groups to do whatever the government of Russia cannot acceptably do as a government". Among other mafiosi under Russia's wing, Spanish sources revealed the name of Taniel Oniani. "Oniani now enjoyed the protection of both the FSB [*Federal Service of Security of the Russian Federation*] and Russia's interior ministry even in prison" concluded the high-ranked prosecutor.<sup>52</sup> While Spaniards did not comment on Oniani's or others' involvement in the Georgian anti-governmental movement, this person has long been known as Saakashvili's foe;
3. Soon after the Russo-Georgian war, some Georgian opponents of Saakashvili started visiting Moscow. Former speaker of the parliament, Nino Burjanadze, welcomed personally by Putin, was notorious in this respect. In May 2011, while planning new anti-governmental actions, Burjanadze and her son were covertly recorded speaking of readiness to use weapons. Burjanadze's son was caught saying that if the Georgian military confronted protesters, they would have to face Russian special units. Burjanadze never denied this conversation, just rebuffed it by saying that the content was taken out of context.

Based on those or other circumstances, international experts had long questioned the integrity of the Georgian opposition, indicating their questionable dealings with foreign intelligence and exiled oligarchs.<sup>53</sup> Many of those who confronted Saakashvili on the internal political scene were people who had enjoyed a relatively higher social status under Shevardnadze's rule or even in late Soviet times, whereas Saakashvili's modernization attempts pushed them into social and political marginalization, as well as personal economic losses. As to the Georgian Orthodox Church, having enjoyed extremely high public trust until recently, it openly positioned itself as an anti-governmental

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<sup>51</sup> **Slade** 2010.

<sup>52</sup> **Harding, Luke** 2010. Wikileaks cables: Russian government 'using mafia for its dirty work'. – The Guardian, 3 December 2010. <[www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/01/wikileaks-cable-spain-russian-mafia](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/01/wikileaks-cable-spain-russian-mafia)>.

<sup>53</sup> **Popescu, Nicu** 2011. Democracy versus Reformism in the Eastern Neighbourhood. – European Council of Foreign Relations, January 11, 2011.

force during the parliamentary elections of 2012. On the eve of the election day, many priests persuaded their flocks to vote against Saakashvili's party, adding another factor that led to the eventual fall of the Rose Revolution government.

Due to space constraints it is not possible to describe the details of the 2012 election campaign and the tactics used by the opposition to unite against and defeat Saakashvili. However, one conclusion related to the Russo-Georgian war, which can be drawn from those political battles, is the following: The election platform of the united opposition included the promise of taking Georgia out of the list of Russian-Western disagreements.<sup>54</sup> Their leader, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili,<sup>55</sup> publicly accused the Georgian government of starting the War of 2008. All that could not but please Russian leadership, especially when Ivanishvili won the elections. Four years after the August War, Vladimir Putin could celebrate a belated victory – a regime change from Saakashvili to someone friendlier to Russian interests was seen in the Kremlin as the main tool for winning the battle with the West over the souls of Georgians.<sup>56</sup>

In the August 2008 confrontation, Georgian armed forces were defeated on the ground. Neither their numbers, nor their pre-war training<sup>57</sup> was a match for the large-scale Russian military invasion. Georgia lost additional pieces of land, almost 200 men in arms died, and thousands of civilians became refugees. However, despite Russia's designs, Saakashvili remained

<sup>54</sup> **Block Bidzina Ivanishvili – Georgian Dream: Election program 2012.**

<<http://www.ivote.ge/images/doc/pdfs/ocnebis%20saarchevno%20programa.pdf>>.

<sup>55</sup> Like Badri Patarkatsishvili, Bidzina Ivanishvili made his fortune in post-Soviet Russia. During the time that Patarkatsishvili was competing with Saakashvili, Ivanishvili was in the shadow, financially supporting the then government. Things started changing after Patarkatsishvili unexpectedly passed away in 2008. In 2011, Ivanishvili openly accused Saakashvili of authoritarianism and launched the unification of the political opposition.

<sup>56</sup> According to U.S. sources, in the midst of the war, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that president Saakashvili “must go”: **Charbonneau, Louis** 2008. U.S. suggests Russia wants “regime change” in Georgia. – Reuters, August 10, 2008. <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-ossetia-un/u-s-suggests-russia-wants-regime-change-in-georgia-idUSL937294920080810>>; According to Russian military and political analyst Pavel Felgenhauer the Kremlin began planning the regime change in Tbilisi as early as 2006. See: **Felgenhauer, Pavel** 2006. Putin comments reveal desire for regime change in Tbilisi. – Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 3, Issue 183, October 4, 2006.

<<https://jamestown.org/program/putin-comments-reveal-desire-for-regime-change-in-tbilisi/>>.

<sup>57</sup> Among various weaknesses of Georgian forces, experts mention the fact that the Georgian army was mostly trained for low intensity warfare. On purely military-technical aspects of the war see: **Tanks of August** 2010.

in power for four more years, continuing to pursue a pro-Western strategic course. Discussions on what was endemic in the Georgian internal political turmoil – owing to deficiencies in Georgian democracy and/or political culture – and what was pre-planned in a hybrid manner by Russia may continue endlessly. However, there is one obvious conclusion – hybrid warfare is no less about usage of local weaknesses than pre-planning. Saakashvili, experiencing multifaceted Russian pressure starting as early as 2006, and witnessing clashes with the opposition a few months prior to the August War, could have the legitimate right to suspect that if he did nothing in South Ossetia, where Georgian positions remained under intensified shelling, the Tbilisi-based opposition would have rallied again. Therefore it is clear that he developed a siege mentality and acted out of desperation on August 7, 2008. Even the lost battles united Georgian society, quieted the opposition at least temporarily and, under international support, Russian tanks stopped short of Tbilisi.

Another question should also be considered: did Russia win anything except the battlefield in this forerunner case of hybrid warfare in Europe? Did its ideology and national project prevail in the region? Or did the separatist nationalisms of Abkhazians and Ossetians emerge victorious in Georgia? The picture may not seem completely clear either, but the fact is that Russia lost legitimate status as the peacekeeper in Georgian ethnic affairs and acquired the label of the occupying force instead.<sup>58</sup> As to the South Ossetian and Abkhaz separatists, the enclaves under their ruling remain isolated, relying only on Russian bayonets, while Georgia, even after the elections of 2012, still looks towards NATO. The story of Georgia's struggle for genuine independence continues, as does Russia's confrontation with the West.

Based on academic freedom and expertise, some Western scholars warned already back in the 1990s that “subversion is a form of offence, and it affects international relations in the same way as do offensive military capabilities”.<sup>59</sup> In 2008, the international community was not ready to

<sup>58</sup> As early as 2009, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly adopted resolution No. 1648 on “Humanitarian consequences of the war between Georgia and Russia”. Its paragraph 24.14 calls for “strengthening of the EUMM (European Union Monitoring Mission) to allow it to have... access to both sides of the *de facto* border zone and former conflict zones since occupied”. **Council of Europe** 2009. Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 1648 on Humanitarian consequences of the war between Georgia and Russia.  
<<http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17705&lang=en>>.

<sup>59</sup> **Evera, Stephen van** 1998. *Offense, Defence, and Causes of War. – Theories of War and Peace (An International Security Reader)*. Ed. by Michael E. Brown; Owen R. Cote Jr.; Sean M. Lynn-Jones; Steven E. Miller. The MIT Press, p.70.

acknowledge that under an essentially defunct peace process Russia was engaged in subversive activities against Georgia, and most significantly, the international community was not ready to rise to the occasion. Neither the U.S., nor the EU knew that subversion would eventually lead to a large-scale armed conflict. After Russia annexed Crimea and orchestrated a military offensive in the Donbas region of Ukraine, the Western international community acknowledged that hybrid war is still war. It is hoped that this new understanding would help the international community to re-evaluate the causes of the Russo-Georgian war, its starting point and to intensify efforts for the correction of its results.

#### 4. Conclusion

As the article attempted to show, the Russo-Georgian War was fought for regional and local ideational purposes. *Firstly*, the leadership of the Russian Federation, frustrated by the demise of the USSR and perceiving international relations in a Manichean way, was ready to do everything short of open declaration of war in order to halt the process of democratization and Europeanization in its immediate neighborhood. *Secondly*, the ethno-nationalist agendas of Georgian separatist enclaves, as well as the impatience of the Georgian government to get rid of the remnants of Russian imperial influence and unite/modernize the country provided fertile ground for Russia to meddle in local affairs and slow the process of possible expansion of NATO into the post-Soviet space. And *thirdly*, from 2008 to 2009, during and after the war, the international community found it difficult to understand the complex logic of the events and to unequivocally condemn Russian geopolitical and ideational revisionism.

Georgian statehood survived, and its pro-Western political agenda remains, by and large, unchanged. Although Russia acquired full military control over the Georgian breakaway regions, it lost the status of peace-keeper, thus limiting its capacity to meddle in the internal affairs of the Georgian government. But it was the hybrid nature of the war that obscured its starting point for many neutral observers, keeping the international community from understanding the essence of Georgian desperation before, during and after open military hostilities. Only after the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine was published and Russia practically used it against Ukraine in 2014 did the U.S., the EU and NATO experts gain a full-fledged appreciation of the “non-linear” or hybrid warfare methodology employed by

modern Russia. These new security developments on the European scale, while not justifying whatever mistakes or undemocratic moves were made by the young Georgian government from 2004 to 2008, allow for a thorough re-evaluation of the events of the Russo-Georgian War.

Thus, the article claims that an undeclared war of hybrid nature was launched by the Russian Federation against Georgia as early as 2006. In 2007, Russia also meddled in the internal political turmoil in Georgia's capital, leading to the resignation of President Saakashvili and the early presidential elections of 2008. Moreover, hybrid warfare against Georgia did not completely stop with the halt of overt military hostilities in August 2008: such components as the support for radical opposition, usage of criminal networks, and disinformation campaigns continued in 2009, and 2011, contributing to the eventual downfall of Saakashvili four years after the events of the August War.

To reiterate, Georgia's internal struggles have their own rationale. Not everyone in Georgia who fought against its former government through the years were Russian stooges. The post-Saakashvili government of Georgia, while trying to improve relations with Putin's Russia, maintains that it wishes to join NATO and the EU. However, Russian special services were present and active constantly as much in the capital city as in the conflict zones, aimed at the regime change in Georgia prior, during and after August of 2008. Under such circumstances, the only guarantee against open Georgian-Russian warfare would have been either Georgia's complete surrender to Russian geopolitical demands, or international peacekeeping engagement in breakaway regions. Neither Georgia nor the international community appeared ready for this at that time and provocations on the ground could have led to nothing but large-scale military confrontation: that is the logic and corollary of hybrid warfare.

The main problem is that the story of the Georgian-Russian confrontation told in the article remains unfinished: all the ingredients and ideational underpinnings for the continuation of hybrid war remain at Russia's disposal and the only guarantee against the repetition of the dramatic events of 2008 is international awareness and resolve.

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