The Five-Day Russia-Georgia War: Origins and Interpretations

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ABSTRACT

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The 2008 Russia-Georgia War was a significant geopolitical event that refocused the world’s attention on an oft-forgotten region of the world. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus has become more important for security and economic reasons, leading to a growth of external involvement in the region. The competition for influence is especially intense between the West and a resurgent Russia. Ever since the early 2000s, Georgia has re-aligned itself away from its historical sponsor toward the United States and Europe. This new orientation, in particular Georgia’s desire to become a full-fledged member of the NATO alliance, is very disconcerting to the Kremlin, which views the region as its traditional “backyard.” Thus, as the West has increased its presence in the Caucasus, Russian interference has intensified. The ensuing geopolitical jostle was a consequential factor in the August 2008 conflict between Russia, Georgia and the separatist enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

While the Five-Day War in early August 2008 gripped the world’s attention, its origins are obscure. South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two restive regions that actively sought independence from Georgia after the Soviet Union’s disintegration, have played a pivotal role in the deterioration of Russian-Georgian relations. Russia has economically and politically supported these two regions to expand its clout in Georgia, much to the annoyance of the Georgian leadership, which wants to re-assert its authority in these areas. Mikhail Saakashvili, Georgia’s president since early 2004, has aggressively pursued a policy of re-unification. This approach put the separatist leadership and Tbilisi on a collision course since their respective goals were essentially irreconcilable. In 2008, the increasing tensions in the region boiled over when Georgian, Russian and separatist forces engaged each other in a short, yet costly war.

Russia clearly won the military battle, but responsibility for the conflict and its consequences are difficult to determine. Who really started the Five-Day War? How did the conflict affect Western-Russian relations, and what is the future of this relationship? How does the conflict fit into the historical context of Russian-Georgian ties? This paper will provide answers to these questions through a discussion of Georgian history, an analysis of the Russian media’s portrayal of Georgia and the war, and an examination of the West’s response to the hostilities.
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Introduction

Georgia and Russia have a long and complex relationship that has significantly shaped the political, social and economic order in the Caucasus for many centuries. Recently, this interaction has received increased scrutiny in light of the Five-Day War in early August 2008, during which a Georgian incursion into its breakaway province of South Ossetia evoked a significantly larger response from its northern neighbor. Russia’s action, purportedly to defend Georgia’s ethnic minorities against ethnic cleansing and genocide, was also clearly influenced by events that took place after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Since at least 2003, Georgia has been caught in the middle of a geopolitical struggle between the West and a resurgent Russia because of its strategic location on the so-called “energy corridor” and, for the West, the “air corridor” that runs from Georgia to Central Asia. By influencing the politics of this small South Caucasian republic, both the West and Russia are vying for greater sway in the region for either economic, political or security purposes.

Specifically, the West is interested in preventing the monopolization of the region’s energy supplies by an unpredictable world power. Such a development would be especially troublesome for many European countries, which are already economically beholden to the Kremlin because of their dependence on Russian natural gas. The United States would also suffer a geopolitical setback if Russia expanded its influence in Georgia: Russia’s influence in the former Soviet republics is inversely related to America’s, so as Russia increases its sway in these countries, the United States’ ability to shape events in this region will decline. This potential decrease in international clout is
not something any U.S. administration should take lightly because of the region’s importance in fighting the war in Afghanistan, specifically its function as a conduit that allows the U.S. to reach its forces in the former Soviet republics east of the Caspian Sea.¹

Russia also has a vested economic interest in the South Caucasus. If it can prevent the West from constructing pipelines through this region to bypass Russian territory, Moscow will have even greater control over Europe’s gas and oil supplies for the foreseeable future. However, Russia’s desire for influence in the South Caucasus is not all about economics. After the Iron Curtain fell, Western ideas and institutions flooded into many areas that the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union formerly dominated, replacing a centuries-old hegemony. This development has not sat well with Russian revanchists. In retrospect, Russian attempts to regain influence in the former Soviet republics were a distinct possibility. Once Russia rebounded economically, a struggle for regional supremacy between Russia and the West was very likely to ensue. From this perspective, the current state of affairs may be interpreted as a continuation of the Cold War. Yet this hypothesis ignores centuries of Georgian history that suggest that this tiny Caucasian state is a permanent area of contention among world powers. In this context, the current geopolitical jostle is a continuation of a centuries-old trend.

The Five-Day Russia-Georgia War is the most violent recent manifestation of the battle for influence in Georgia and a reflection of how important the region is to each party. During and after the war, the rhetoric from the West, Georgia and Russia was sharp and aggressive. The West accused Russia of overreacting; Georgia blamed Russia for starting the war and alleged that the Russian military specifically targeted Georgian
civilians; and Russia claimed that Georgia initiated hostilities and that genocide took place in South Ossetia at the hands of the Georgian armed forces. The way that the Russian government and media portrayed the war was particularly revealing. Since many media outlets are either directly or indirectly controlled by the Kremlin, a consideration of media reports provides an opportunity to analyze how the central government wanted people to see the conflict, and how Russia’s leaders wanted to be perceived. Based on rhetoric from government officials and news articles during and after the Five-Day War, it seems that the main target of the criticism was not the West, but Mikhail Saakashvili and the Georgian government. This phenomenon was especially evident as time passed. Even in early 2009, Saakashvili is still the subject of ridicule in the Russian press, whereas Western countries are increasingly portrayed as partners, not enemies. Although the West’s relationship with Russia has not returned to its pre-war condition, it is markedly better than it was immediately following the cessation of hostilities in early August. The clear difference in the treatment of the Georgian government and the West in the Russian media strongly suggests that the so-called “Cold War” is not between Russia and its former Cold-War foes, but between Russia and the current leadership in Tbilisi.

Georgian history, in a way, supports this idea. Russia has jockeyed for power in the region for centuries with foreign powers. Although sometimes conflict resulted from the competition, a certain degree of outside influence was inevitable because of Georgia’s location on multiple empires’ peripheries, including Russia’s. Thus, Russia is probably comfortable with a particular amount of Western influence, but Saakashvili proved to be
too pro-Western for Moscow’s tastes, which led to the increased tensions that culminated in the Five-Day War. Georgian history, from antiquity to the present day, is full of examples where one great empire’s relatively dominant hold on power in the region is challenged by another foreign entity. The contest between the West and Russia in the region could be interpreted as such: newcomers upending the status quo after centuries of Russian suzerainty.

The August confrontation brings this present geopolitical tug-of-war in the Caucasus into sharp focus, and poses several important questions: To what extent does the current stand-off in Georgia reflect older contests between empires? Is the world on the cusp of a new Cold War-style geopolitical climate, or is the conflict more regional in scope? Also, what is the future of Western-Russian relations in the wake of the Five-Day War between Tbilisi and Moscow? Through a discussion of Georgian history from antiquity to August 2008 and a meticulous analysis of the Russian media and rhetoric from Moscow since the early 2000s, this paper will provide meaningful answers to the aforementioned questions. The contemporary situation in the Caucasus is strikingly similar to bygone eras, but there are crucial differences that make the current geopolitical struggle distinct. Also, there is a Cold War-esque standoff taking place in the region; however, today it involves different players compared to the twentieth century showdown. Finally, the impact of the Five-Day Russia-Georgia War on Western-Russian ties in the short term may have been significant, but long-term relations will most likely not be greatly affected.
Contested Space

The Caucasus, including Georgia, has fallen under the yoke of a multitude of empires throughout its history. Ever since the ancestors of contemporary Georgians moved into an area that is a part of modern-day Georgia roughly in the sixth century B.C., this tiny Caucasian enclave has been a battleground upon which powerful rivals have fought for influence. In addition, Georgia has a long history of internal fragmentation, which has enhanced its vulnerability to outsiders and contributed to centuries of foreign interference. The Persians and the Greeks were some of the first to jockey for control over this area when it was inhabited by the peoples who represent the earliest Georgians. This competition lasted until the ascendancy of Rome in the Caucasus, which occurred in the first century B.C.²

After the introduction of Rome, the struggle maintained its east-versus-west character: the entity from the east, Parthia (Iran), vied for dominance in the Caucasus against its western foe for approximately three hundred years.³ Rome’s cultural impact on Georgian society was huge, primarily because it led to the Christianization of the Georgian people in 330 A.D. D.M. Lang claims that Georgia was transformed into “an outer bulwark of Christendom in the pagan Orient” after the conversion. He also stresses that this newfound religion gave the Georgian nation an identity that helped it survive many years of foreign dominance.⁴

The fall of Rome did little to change the situation in the Caucasus. Byzantium, born from the Eastern Roman Empire, continued to pester the region from the west, while Iran encroached from the east. This contest lasted until the seventh century, when Islamic
invaders tore through Iran and established control over the region. Though the foreign power in the east changed, the competition for the Caucasus continued. Byzantine-Arab conflicts dominated Georgian affairs until the Seljuk Turks broke Byzantium’s hold in the region in the late eleventh century. Earlier in this century, a large swath of present-day Georgia became a single entity (1008 A.D.). This precarious unity buckled under enormous Turkish pressure in the eleventh century. However, in the early twelfth century, King David II of Georgia began a campaign to expel the Turks from the region. In 1122, this culminated in the seizure of Tbilisi from the Muslims. Thus began a prolonged period of prosperity, when Georgia was a regional power beholden to no foreign entity.

Unfortunately for the Georgians, this era of relative power would not last. Starting in 1220, the numerous Mongol forays into the region significantly diminished the Georgian monarchs’ authority. Then, in the next century, Tamerlane swept through the region, leaving the former Caucasian power in shambles: “The countryside was strewn with the ruins of churches, castles and towns, the people fled to the hills, and once busy roads were overgrown with grass and bushes.” In light of such destruction, what happened next is not surprising: Georgia experienced a period of gradual debilitation for hundreds of years. Partially as a result of this weakness, Georgia was again vulnerable to the whims of ambitious empires. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Turks marched into western Georgia and the Iranians established their dominance in the eastern part of the country. Thus, another era of jostling between two external civilizations seemed to be upon the Georgian nation. However, it was a third
party, Russia, which would define this new age, and eventually have a profound impact on all aspects of Georgian society. The history of Georgia is a complex narrative of the ebb and flow of empires that shaped the region economically, politically and socially, and defined this Caucasian state’s future development.

The Bear Stumbles In

1492 was a monumental year in world history for some countries, especially Spain: Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue and discovered the New World; the Iberian Peninsula was finally united under a Christian banner; and the Jews and Muslims were forced out of their Spanish homeland by the dogmatic Catholic monarchs. For Georgia, 1492 was not a turning point; on the contrary, on the surface it was historically mundane. The country was still in the doldrums, and, as stated previously, it was on the cusp of a renewed period of foreign interference. However, one small event deserves some attention: 1492 was the year when the ruler of eastern Georgia dispatched “an embassy of friendship” to the Russian court in Moscow.14 Ostensibly, this seemed to be a normal diplomatic exchange, of the type that occurred frequently in the late 15th century. Little did the Georgians (or the Russians) know that this mission would be the beginning of bilateral relations that would have a deep impact on this small Caucasian country.

Meaningful communication between Russia and Georgia did not occur until the late 16th century. Alexandre II, the king of Kakheti (eastern Georgia), needed Russian support against his external enemies, so he promised to be the Russian tsar’s servant in exchange for military assistance. Ivan IV technically rendered the promised aid, but it
was nowhere near sufficient. Thus, the result of the initial agreement between the two countries was very much to Georgia’s disadvantage; Georgia relied on Russia’s guarantee, only to be deeply disappointed when Ivan IV did fully reciprocate. Unfortunately, this unsatisfactory outcome would become typical of Russian-Georgian relations through the centuries.

Iran and Turkey were still the principal players in the region in the 1600s, though Russia did make attempts to shape events in the Caucasus. Early in the century, Russia militarily aided Alexandre II’s son by defeating the Ottomans on Georgian soil. However, this action did not remove the Ottoman menace from Georgian affairs, and Russia was forced to take a more passive role during the first few decades of the seventeenth century as a result of the “Time of Troubles” and its aftermath.

According to D.M Lang, Russian policy in the Caucasus in the mid-to-late 1600s was characterized by “[p]eaceful penetration.” There was a flurry of diplomatic activity, but no aggressive moves to protect Georgia from the Islamic empires. This situation changed somewhat while Peter the Great was tsar in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when the Russian ruler, emboldened by Iran’s internal problems, convinced eastern Georgia’s king to become more closely associated with St. Petersburg. Regrettably, the Georgians experienced more hard luck: the Ottomans also saw an opportunity and swept into Georgia, preempting the Russians. Peter the Great was not interested in an armed conflict with the Turks, so he backed off. After this misadventure, Russia’s presence in the Caucasus was diminished.
Despite the unfortunate events during Peter the Great’s rule, Georgia and Russia gradually became more and more connected starting in the middle of the eighteenth century, though Russia still was not the dominant force in the Caucasus. In 1768, a conflict involving the Ottomans and the Russians seemed to provide an opportunity for the Georgian leadership to cement a binding relationship with its northern neighbor. The interests of both parties conveniently coincided: Catherine the Great of Russia needed manpower east of the Black Sea to pester the Turks, and the Georgians sought an end to Islamic interference. However, the Russians failed yet again to follow through. When they were needed against the Ottomans, the Russian soldiers withdrew, which exposed the Georgians to a sizeable Muslim army. Furthermore, when the Turks and the Russians eventually ceased hostilities, the terms of the peace were not favorable to Georgia, even though Catherine had agreed to look after the small country during the peace negotiations.

Approximately ten years later, though, Russia again had pretensions to establish a foothold in Georgia. This desire led to the Treaty of Georgievsk, which was ratified by Russia and Kartli-Kakheti (basically eastern Georgia) in 1783. The document recognized a large section of Georgia as the “protectorate” of Russia. Yet when this agreement was put to the test almost four years later when hostilities flared up against the Ottomans, Russian support was once again nowhere to be found. Vulnerable to other foreign powers, Georgia experienced another Iranian military campaign within a decade (1795). After the Iranian foray, Russia once more dispatched forces to the region to carve out Russia’s sphere of influence; however, this support was also temporary. The new age in
Georgian history that Russia’s presence precipitated retained an essential aspect of past eras: a sustained competition for influence between external powers.

**Russian Georgia**

In 1801, Alexander I of Russia abrogated the royal line’s sovereignty in Kartli-Kakheti and took control of its territory. These actions were direct violations of the Treaty of Georgievsk, which called for “no interference in the internal affairs of Georgia.”

Over time, Russia was able to subjugate the rest of Georgia, which culminated in 1864 with the annexation of Abkhazia.

Georgia suffered economically, politically and socially during its first few decades in the Russian Empire. Russian administration was extremely corrupt, the infrastructure was crumbling, and in some cases nonexistent, and the “oppression of the people” was rampant. However, a culturally savvy viceroy was finally put in charge in the mid-nineteenth century: Mikhail Vorontsov. By implementing numerous political and social reforms, he established good relations with the Georgian aristocracy, which contributed to its eventual enthusiasm for the Russian administration of Georgia. Thus, in the mid-1800s, the upper class was generally in favor of Russia’s dominance in the region, though change was on the horizon that would foster a variety of movements against the status quo.

Ironically, as Ronald Grigor Suny explains, the Russians helped the Georgians on the path toward “national reformation and ethnic confrontation” by “guarantee[ing] a degree of peace, security, and economic progress in certain sectors.” Therefore, it
would not be a stretch to say that Russia’s decision to make Georgia a part of its empire, which in the short term made the emergence of a strong and independent Georgia practically impossible, was in the long run the first measure needed to make an autonomous, prosperous and modern Georgian state possible. Another consequence of Russian control that Suny discusses is the fact that it led to a higher level of interconnectedness in the region, which helped foster a better understanding among the Georgian people of what it meant to be Georgian, and what it meant to be an outsider. By the late nineteenth century, Georgian intellectuals were actively discussing “the deeper question of Georgia’s future relationship with Russia.”

The intellectual awakening radicalized some members of Georgian society. The early twentieth century was marked by continually escalating tensions between the revolutionary movements in Georgia and the Russian autocracy. During the 1905 Revolution, this environment exploded like many other parts of the Russian Empire. The insurrections in Georgia were brutally crushed, and the Russian government sent thousands of Georgians to Russia’s eastern provinces as a punishment. The aftermath of this revolution created a poisonous atmosphere in which many different groups suffered, particularly the peasants, factory workers and the Georgian Church. The misery was not confined to the Caucasus: it was a harsh reality throughout the Russian Empire. As a result, after three hundred years of stringent autocracy, the citizens of Russia had had enough. In February 1917, Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown. Almost one year later, in May 1918, Georgia formally seceded from the Russian Empire. This declaration would be the country’s first of the twentieth century.
A Caucasian Conflagration

After Georgia announced its independence from a chaotic and distracted Russia in 1918, a series of events followed that would have lasting repercussions for this small Caucasian nation. Georgia was not alone in separating from its former overlord: Azerbaijan and Armenia also became independent countries. However, not everyone in the region was keen on breaking from Russia. Two small enclaves in Georgia—South Ossetia and Abkhazia—desired their own form of sovereignty, which did not correspond to Georgia’s goal of a unified state.

Abkhazia, as stated earlier, was annexed by Russia in 1864. However, this was not the first time this union was in effect: in 1810, Abkhazia apparently decided that resistance to Russia was futile, so it joined Tsar Alexander I’s domain of its own accord. Probably because this step was not the result of coercion, Abkhazia “retain[ed] its autonomous structures.” By 1830, though, the conflict between the Turks and the Russians altered the enclave’s allegiance to its Muslim brethren. Over the next thirty-plus years, Abkhazia took up arms against Russia and its Georgian allies. This resistance came to an end when Russia completely took over the enclave.

Before the 19th century, Abkhazia was outside of Russia’s sphere of influence. The Abkhazian people began to inhabit the land within their contemporary borders around the beginning of the Common Era. Although originally Christian, the Abkhazians became Muslims while under Ottoman control (1500s-1700s). This means that there was a profound religious difference between the Georgians and their near-neighbors the Abkhazians, probably contributing to the aforementioned conflict in the middle of the
nineteenth century. The close geographical proximity of the two peoples and the violent history associated with their relationship was most likely a source of tension, but as events in the early twentieth century unfolded, old grievances, at least initially, were disregarded.

Despite the fact that the small enclave engaged in thirty years of war against Georgia, Abkhazia and its near neighbor to the south share one thing in common: each suffered from Russian oppression. The Abkhazians rose up against tsarist rule twice between 1864 and 1878. As a result, many Abkhazians were deported from their native land to be replaced by other peoples of Russia’s choosing. Thus, at the time of the revolution, Abkhazia had sharp historical grievances against Russia, which, assuming that the Abkhazians did not harbor an equal amount of resentment against the Georgians, should have made the population more inclined to align itself with Georgia instead of Russia.

At first, this orientation did occur. Each side signed a pact that guaranteed Abkhazian self-governance shortly after Georgia became independent. A historical distrust did manifest itself, though. For various reasons, Georgia violently took away Abkhazia’s quasi-independence on two separate occasions. The consequence of these actions was that in 1921, Abkhazia threw itself into the arms of its former master by “declar[ing] independence and proclaim[ing] the establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia—a union-level republic directly subject to Moscow with no formal links to the newly created Georgian SSR.” Ironically, Russia became the “savior” of
Abkhazia during this tumultuous time, even though it was Russia that had (sometimes harshly) ruled this region for many years in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The history of South Ossetia in the context of Russian-Georgian relations is fairly similar to Abkhazia’s. The people who would become the Ossetians politically organized during the Middle Ages, some eventually coexisting with the Georgians. When Russia expanded into the region in the early nineteenth century, the Ossetians, along with the Georgians, became subjects of the Russian tsar. Since the Ossetians straddled the northern Caucasus range, they had been divided into two distinct regions for some time, so Russia officially recognized this boundary when carving out the recently acquired territory. South Ossetia was technically within “the Georgian province” during this time, while North Ossetia belonged to another organizational unit to the north. Since imperial Russia was such a centralized state, and the cultural ties between the peoples were so strong, the imaginary divide was a mere formality.\(^{36}\) However, this separation would become very important during the Russian Civil War, when Georgia acted to maintain its territorial integrity as defined by the borders created by the Russians.

Like the Abkhazians, the Ossetians looked to Russia for support when Georgia became aggressive. When they openly espoused a strong union with the emerging communist Russia, Georgia moved in militarily to quell this sentiment. The result of this action was devastating for the Ossetians: although the number of casualties may differ depending on the source, there is no doubt that many died and suffered as a result of Georgia’s military campaign.\(^{37}\)
Unfortunately for the Ossetians (and eventually the Abkhazians), the Bolsheviks only partially freed them from Georgian interference. Eventually, as stated previously, Russia re-conquered Georgia and made it a “Soviet Socialist Republic.” In 1922, Soviet Russia made South Ossetia an “Autonomous Region,” which resulted in “some limited autonomy.” This concession, though, did not rid the Ossetians of the Georgians. The Soviet leadership decided to keep South Ossetia within communist Georgia, so the Georgians still exercised some control over the Ossetians.\(^{38}\) The Abkhazians suffered a similar fate. In 1931, Abkhazia was downgraded from a “Soviet Socialist Republic” to “an autonomous republic within Georgia.”\(^{39}\)

Thus, Georgia’s ethnic minorities did not receive exactly what they wanted from their supposed protector to the north. In the short term, they were protected in a physical sense from Georgian military interventions. However, they did not completely decouple from Georgia politically. Each enclave was assigned to the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. While this situation did not give Georgia free rein in these restless areas, it did empower Georgia to a certain extent in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The fact that neither Georgia nor the ethnic republics had complete ownership of their affairs was not accidental: Soviet Russia would benefit, at least in the near future, from these purposeful divisions.

The plan to carve up Georgia and the Caucasus as a whole was a product of “Soviet ethnofederalism,” as Christopher Zürcher labels the policy. This course of action established different levels of power by splitting the country into “ethnoterritorial units,” all of which answered to Moscow. The borders, as the name suggests, were drawn along
ethnic lines. There were four principal entities: “union republics,” “autonomous republics,” “autonomous oblasts” and “autonomous okrugs.” Union republics had the most “autonomy and privileges,” with autonomous republics, oblasts and okrugs following suit.\textsuperscript{40} As mentioned earlier, Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were a union republic, autonomous republic and autonomous oblast, respectively.

Zürcher also notes that the Soviet Union’s ethnofederalism helped strengthen Moscow’s influence because it adhered to “the ‘divide and rule’ principle.” By keeping a union republic divided, its desires or actions, if perceived to be detrimental to its ethnic subdivisions, could be thwarted by the same political entities within its borders (sometimes with Moscow’s help). Conversely, the autonomous republics and oblasts were kept in check by the union republic. In short, this type of organization allowed Moscow to have “the possibility of playing groups off against one other.”\textsuperscript{41} Again, in the short term, the strategy of “divide and rule” increased the central government’s ability to shape events in the Caucasus. In the long run, though, Soviet policy in the region would have the same impact that the annexation of Georgia had more than a century earlier: it would foster national identities and interethnic strife.\textsuperscript{42}

Evidence of this emerging nationalist fervor manifested itself during Soviet rule. One prominent example is the fact that before the 1980s some influential Abkhazians formally tried three times to convince the Russian authorities to redraw the political boundaries in the Caucasus so that Abkhazia would no longer be a part of Georgia. The attempts failed, but their wish to break from Georgia illustrates how Soviet
ethnofederalism was beginning to have the unexpected consequence of igniting nationalistic desires.\textsuperscript{43}

**The Breakup of Georgia**

Soviet rule in the Caucasus was a force of tenuous stability. Despite the growing hatred between the various ethnic groups, there were no widespread armed conflicts in the region while Moscow remained in control. Unfortunately, this state of relative tranquility did not last forever. In the late 1980s, it was apparent that the Soviet system was slowly disintegrating. In 1989, as a result of the emerging power vacuum and simmering ethnic tensions, Georgia became a war zone. The sharp divisions that developed and solidified during the ensuing hostilities continue to haunt the region.\textsuperscript{44}

Georgia was engulfed by three conflicts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, two of which involved military confrontations with South Ossetia or Abkhazia.\textsuperscript{45} In South Ossetia, hostilities broke out in 1989 when “a war of laws,” initiated by the Georgian leadership’s decision to require “the use of Georgian…in the public sector throughout the republic,” culminated in armed conflict. In response to this measure, South Ossetia established Ossetian as the principal tongue within its borders and legally maneuvered to become an “autonomous republic,” which would have given the enclave more sovereignty. Georgia retaliated, much as it did during the Russian Revolution, in order to stamp out the Ossetians’ desire for more self-control. This time, however, the “force” was a large gathering of Georgians that was transported to Tskhinvali, South Ossetia, to show displeasure at the Ossetians’ insistence on more sovereignty. The Georgians never made
it to their intended destination thanks to the still functioning Soviet police, but the act prompted the mobilization of armed Ossetian units.\textsuperscript{46}

After this incident, the “war of laws” continued. In the late summer of the following year, Georgia enacted an even more provocative measure, which banned region-specific political organizations from activity in the fast-approaching parliamentary elections. One month later, in late September, South Ossetia declared that it was no longer a part of Georgia, and that it was to be “a Democratic Soviet Republic” directly beholden to the crumbling Soviet center. In a demonstration of this newly-claimed independence, the Ossetian government held elections in early December. This move prompted the Georgian authorities to nullify the elections and strip the enclave of its previously-held sovereignty. Then, to further punish and squelch South Ossetia’s feistiness, the Georgian government isolated the enclave economically. The conflict again became violent in early January 1991, when an armed contingent was sent to Tskhinvali, which wreaked havoc on the city by “looting and attacking the civilian population.” Georgia’s armed forces were again dispatched to the Ossetian capital in late March 1991 because of the enclave’s decision to boycott a country-wide election that would decide whether Georgia would break away from Russia. The force was eventually repulsed.\textsuperscript{47}

Thus, Soviet policies in the Caucasus had the effect of mobilizing ethnicities to become more nationally assertive, which led to the aforementioned legal and military clashes between the Georgians and South Ossetians.

In September 1991, the president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, decided to subdue the rebellious republic militarily once more. Like the March incursion, this one
was unsuccessful. Four months later, in January 1992, Gamsakhurdia’s opponents overthrew him. As a result of this putsch, Eduard Shevardnadze took charge of the Georgian government. In the midst of dealing with the remnants of Gamsakhurdia’s regime in Georgia’s almost two-year civil war (1991-1993), he tried to end the South Ossetian war, but contradicted the peace process by launching another assault against Tskhinvali later in the year. The Shevardnadze campaign “burned and destroyed up to 80 percent of dwellings in the city.” The shooting conflict was finally put to rest in mid-June 1992, when all of the parties involved—Russia, Georgia, and North and South Ossetia—approved a cease-fire. The treaty stipulated that “a joint peace-keeping force,” comprised of armed units from the signatories of the pact, would maintain the peace between the Georgians and South Ossetians. As the August 2008 conflict graphically showed, the so-called peace among the Georgian and Ossetian nations was tenuous at best.

The Abkhazian War

The so-called “war of laws” that fueled the South Ossetian-Georgian rift from 1989 to 1991 also occurred between Abkhazia and Georgia. Like South Ossetia, Abkhazia declared a form of independence from Georgia. It wanted “union republic” status as a part of Moscow’s communist empire. Predictably, Georgia rejected this attempt. Ironically, while Gamsakhurdia was in power, the two governments found common ground by negotiating electoral reform at the regional level. Basically, the agreement allowed the Abkhazians to have a certain number of representatives in the
region’s legislative body. Unfortunately, whatever goodwill this fostered was ephemeral. Soon, a combination of factors would lead both peoples to armed conflict.\textsuperscript{49}

After Gamsakhurdia was replaced by Shevardnadze, everything seemed to unravel. He wanted to take a hard line against separatism, so he distanced himself from the Gamsakhurdia pact. The Abkhazians also were uncooperative. In July 1992, the authorities ignored the accord and restored “the draft 1925 Abkhazian Constitution,” which essentially separated the small republic from Georgia. One month later, the shooting war began.\textsuperscript{50}

Shevardnadze launched a campaign into Abkhazia in August 1992, ostensibly to free high-ranking hostages being held there by the Georgian opposition. A force of six thousand took part in the campaign. Widespread pillaging characterized the operation’s initial phase. However, with Russia’s help, the Abkhazians eventually turned the tide of the war. Not only did the enclave receive “direct support” from its northern neighbor, but in September 1993 it violated a one-and-a half-month old Russian-brokered cease-fire by assaulting Georgian soldiers in Sukhumi. This maneuver proved to be the conflict’s final phase. The defeated Georgians were forced to concede the breakaway republic. In order to maintain stability in the region, Russian peacekeepers and UN officials were sent to the area in the summer of 1994.\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{Post-War Georgia in the 1990s}

The various conflicts on Georgia soil that coincided with the Soviet Union’s disintegration took their toll on the region. Economically, Georgia suffered a significant
setback. Real GDP growth was negative for much of the early 1990s, but was especially horrendous in 1992 and 1993, when it contracted approximately 40% each year. Not until 1995 did the economy begin to expand again. In the political sphere, Georgia also faced serious challenges. The final status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was still not resolved and Russian military units were still on Georgian soil. Also, armed factions threatened to unravel the fragile Georgian government. Some of these groups were responsible for inviting Shevardnadze to become the Caucasian state’s new leader, but he turned on them after the separatist wars because he perceived them as threats to stability. In 1995, two major leaders of these factions were put behind bars. Despite this success, Georgia was an economically and politically crumbling state, and it fell on Shevardnadze to solve the country’s problems. Although the difficulties facing Shevardnadze were clearly distinct from Georgia’s past troubles, they do share a remarkable similarity: just like the Turks and the Iranians threatened the existence of a sovereign Georgia, the breakaway republics and the decrepit state of the economy in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Empire were detrimental to the authorities’ ability to re-establish a semblance of normalcy. In a move reminiscent of his predecessors, Shevardnadze found a solution to Georgia’s predicament by looking north to Russia.

Like earlier Georgian leaders, Shevardnadze regarded Russia as a potential partner. He firmly believed that Moscow could fix Georgia’s separatist problem and help build up its almost non-existent military. In order to convince Russia to come to Georgia’s aid, Shevardnadze tried multiple approaches. In 1994, as a first step, the Caucasian state entered the Commonwealth of Independent States, which brought to a
halt years of official obstinacy regarding this issue, and was a move meant to placate Russia.\textsuperscript{55} Secondly, Georgia acquiesced in Russia’s insistence on keeping its soldiers in the region by “leasing four bases on Georgian territory to the Russian armed forces” in the fall of 1995.\textsuperscript{56} The decision to allow Russian soldiers to be in Georgia was mostly a formality. Soviet/Russian forces had been stationed on Georgian soil for decades before the 1995 deal mentioned above.\textsuperscript{57} However, Shevardnadze hoped that by consenting to a continued Russian presence under official auspices, Georgia would benefit in time. Theoretically, as a result of Russian intervention, Georgia would eventually have a military strong enough to execute the government’s will in all parts of the country, and the situation concerning the breakaway republics would be resolved in such a way that Georgia could effectively govern and/or peacefully coexist with them.\textsuperscript{58}

Unfortunately, the compromise was inherently flawed. Basically, Russia was officially invited into Georgia to help the Georgian government attain the “internal sovereignty” that was so elusive in the country’s first few years of independence. Ironically, if Russia did keep its promises, there would be no need for Russian soldiers in Georgia because the Caucasian republic would eventually have a functioning military alongside peaceful relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia was thus not enthusiastic about fostering the growth of the Georgian military or becoming a facilitator in negotiations between Georgia and its separatist enclaves.\textsuperscript{59} This negligence on the part of Russia, in particular the lack of military support, would come back to haunt Moscow.

Russia continued to drag its feet on the base issue in the late 1990s and into the next century. In 1999, Georgia was able to convince Russia to shut down two of the four
military facilities that were leased in 1995. Moscow promised that by the summer of 2001, both installations would be completely abandoned. Georgia in return gave up some of the CFE quota that it held as a result of the Soviet Union’s demise. Thus, half of Russia’s major military centers in Georgia were closed by 2001. Although this was not the end of the Russian presence, it represented the beginning of Russia’s military withdrawal from Georgia. Georgia’s political status fundamentally changed after the fall of the Soviet Union, but the country’s post-Soviet experience was dominated by Russia partially because its economic, social and political strength were greatly diminished after the bloody separatist wars in the early 1990s.

**Georgia Looks West…**

In 1995, Eduard Shevardnadze stated that besides Russia, “[t]here is no other partner…in the world” that could provide his country with military hardware and know-how. Shevardnadze’s rhetoric sounded like a thinly-veiled cry for help. In the first decade after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, his was an accurate assessment of Georgia’s geopolitical position. Economically and politically, Tbilisi was heavily dependent on Russia. However, at the end of the 1990s, Georgia gradually began to re-orient itself toward the West in search of additional sources of economic and political support.

Some of the initial signals of this emerging engagement with the West occurred in 1999, when the United States, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia established the framework for the future Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, a conduit for oil that would bypass
Russian territory. Georgia entered the Council of Europe that year, an organization that “seeks to develop throughout Europe common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other reference texts on the protection of individuals.” Both decisions helped Georgia strengthen ties with the West. Another sign of this new course was a 2000 publication articulating the country’s international strategy released by the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Specifically, the strategy called for more cooperation with Western organizations like NATO and the European Union.

These actions were followed by Shevardnadze’s decision at the beginning of the 21st century to permit U.S. forces to have a presence in the Caucasian republic. From Georgia’s perspective, Russia had become a problem, not a solution to the country’s woes. Thus, Tbilisi looked across the Atlantic for a supporter that would check Moscow’s overzealous interference.

...And the West Looks East

While the process of Georgia’s Western re-orientation began before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, it picked up steam and came to fruition after these events. As a result of the United States’ growing interest in the region, the Georgian military finally found a sponsor. In 2002 and 2003, the United States and other Western nations began two initiatives to modernize the Caucasian country’s military: one was the Georgia Train and Equip Program, which began in 2002, and the other—the International Military Education and Training Program—was established in 2003. The former resulted in an official American presence in Georgia. American forces became actively
involved in the development of the Georgian security services, principally to teach them the ways of counterterrorism to address internal pockets of unrest. The United States also provided the necessary accoutrement for such campaigns. Russia’s insistence that Georgia do more to stop “terrorist” activity reached a fever pitch in late 2002. The United States at this time was attempting to justify military action in Iraq, and it specifically cited the fact that Saddam Hussein was harboring terrorists as a *casus belli*. Putin deftly used a similar justification for armed intervention in Georgia: if Tbilisi refused to deal with the terrorists, then according to the Americans’ logic, Moscow could address the problem with force. Understanding the precarious situation, Shevardnadze began to decrease Georgia’s engagement with the West and cooperated more with Russia, much to the chagrin of some American officials. This temporary disengagement, along with a plethora of domestic problems, would help bring about the Rose Revolution.

**The Rose Revolution and Saakashvili’s Georgia**

Naturally, Russia was delighted to see Shevardnadze deviate from his Western path. In an act of goodwill toward Moscow, he opened the Georgian economy to Russian influence. As soon as the Georgian president began to develop a closer relationship to Putin, the West started to withdraw its support for him. American officials began to court the Georgian opposition in hopes of re-aligning the country’s policies with the West. Well-funded NGOs, frustrated with the flourishing corruption, also supported the opposition. One individual who stood out was a young Ivy League-educated lawyer named Mikhail Saakashvili. At one time the minister of justice in the Shevardnadze
administration, he then resigned in protest of the rampant corruption in the government. Saakashvili’s reputation for fighting corruption helped bolster his stature with the population and various Western backers. After frustration with the current government manifested itself in the wake of parliamentary elections in late 2003, Shevardnadze succumbed to the pressure and stepped down. In January 2004, presidential elections took place, which resulted in Saakashvili becoming president of Georgia.

The election of Saakashvili was a turning point in Georgia’s international posture. Saakashvili pursued an ambitious platform: he actively worked for Georgian NATO membership and the country’s re-unification. A significant sign of this geopolitical shift was the fact that in 2005 Georgia was able to persuade Russia to shut down the second half of the bases that it leased to its northern neighbor in the 1990s, a process that had to be completed before 2009. Another indication was the fact that Georgia became very belligerent with Moscow. In the winter of 2006, when important electrical and energy infrastructures were significantly affected by bombs, Saakashvili immediately blamed Russia. Later in the year, Georgia arrested Russian military officers for espionage. The Kremlin responded with a series of punitive measures aimed at crippling the Georgian economy. The back-and-forth between the two countries continued into early 2008, when a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was destroyed over Abkhazian territory. Although this new behavior can be partly explained by an increase in Russian interference intended to undermine the Saakashvili regime, Georgia’s responses to (perceived) Russian wrongs were relatively sharp.
By the summer of 2008, tensions were very high. A few months earlier, the Kremlin had openly declared a willingness to engage more closely with the governments of the unrecognized republics. Then, Moscow dispatched a few hundred soldiers to the separatist republic of Abkhazia in order to perform manual labor. The Georgian government believed that the move was meant to better position Russian forces for an attack. Finally, one of the most provocative moves of the year was the military exercise in the Northern Caucasus called “Kavkaz 2008,” or Caucasus 2008. A large number of Russian soldiers participated in this operation, which was held very close to the Georgian border in July. By early August 2008, Georgia was a powder keg needing only a spark.

**The Five-Day War**

The increasing friction between Russia and Georgia in the twenty-first century coincided with Georgia’s deteriorating relationship with its separatist enclaves. The decade was characterized by frequent skirmishes, mysterious explosions and separatist elections that Georgia did not sanction. By the summer of 2008, conditions were ripe for conflict. This simmering cauldron boiled over on August 7. The circumstances surrounding the beginning of the conflict are hotly contested. Each side offers a version of events meant to undermine its opponent’s international and domestic credibility.

What happened on Friday, August 7, is the focal point of the world’s scrutiny. Based on reports from the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (O.S.C.E.), Georgia was conducting a military build-up close to the South Ossetian border at 3 p.m. The Georgians justified this move as a response to separatist shelling that
had been occurring intermittently since the night before. Then, according to the Russians, Georgia retaliated with its own barrage. At 7 p.m., Georgian president announced a unilateral cease-fire to try to keep the situation from spiraling out of control, though Georgian forces continued to organize near South Ossetia. According to Georgian claims, four hours later South Ossetia had resumed its salvo of civilian targets; however, O.S.C.E. representatives in the area challenge this account, saying that because they were so close to some of the Georgian villages in question that they would have detected the falling rounds, but they did not. Tbilisi also contends that Russian forces had moved into the Roki Tunnel, which connects Russia and South Ossetia, at around 11 p.m. Thirty-five minutes later, Georgia started its shelling of Tskhinvali, which subsequently killed Russian peacekeepers and scores of civilians. Georgia maintains that the barrage constituted a focused effort to eliminate military targets, but reports on the ground, from the O.S.C.E. in particular, suggest that it was a haphazard bombardment that resulted in unnecessary death and destruction. The Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali, which lasted several hours, ushered in a new phase of the conflict, one that pitted the Russian military against Georgian regulars.  

On Saturday, August 8, at approximately 10 a.m., Georgian soldiers moved into the heart of the South Ossetian capital. Using aircraft and indirect fire, Russia quickly ousted the Georgians. In the mid-afternoon, Georgian forces again attempted to take Tskhinvali. As in the first confrontation, Russian air strikes and shelling drove the Georgians out of the city. Undeterred, Georgia attempted to take the city one more time, an attempt that failed as a result of the Russian military’s superior numbers and
technology. The next day, the Georgians retreated to Gori, a Georgian city close to the Ossetian border.82

From August 9 to August 13, Russian forces pounded military and civilian infrastructures on Georgian territory. On Sunday, August 10, despite Georgian calls for a cease-fire, Russian warplanes struck airfields around Tbilisi. The day before, the Russians had carried out air strikes against certain structures in Gori. Such aerial bombardments persisted throughout the armed confrontation, seriously crippling Georgia’s ability to wage war and subsequently debilitating the country’s economy.83

Russia’s ground forces were also active on Georgian soil, destroying military and civilian targets. On Sunday, after Georgian forces fled South Ossetia, Russian military units continued their drive south in the direction of Gori.84 On Monday, Russian forces neutralized a Georgian military installation in Senaki, a city located southeast of Abkhazian territory. This development was related to efforts to remove Georgia’s armed presence in and around Abkhazia, which the Russians and Abkhazians successfully accomplished on August 13 when Georgian forces left the Kodori Gorge.85 The war also engulfed Poti. Russian forces entered the coastal city multiple times during the war to take out targets of military value, but non-military structures were also affected by air strikes. There were also reports that Russian soldiers were involved in the pillaging of various military buildings.86 The various incursions into universally recognized Georgian land, including those not mentioned above, were one of the more controversial aspects of the war. The broad campaign undermined Russia’s claim that it was acting solely to
defend its peacekeepers and the separatist republics. Western critics repeatedly called the Russian response “disproportionate” as the ground and air campaign intensified.

The Russians were not the only party that fought the Georgians. South Ossetia also played an important role in the conflict, in particular the enclave’s militias. The Ossetian militias’ activities were the subject of intense scrutiny after the war. Aside from allegations that the Ossetians provoked the Georgians into bombarding Tskhinvali by using artillery against ethnic Georgian towns, these armed bands, according to Amnesty International, were allegedly guilty of “serious abuses against ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia and adjacent ‘buffer zones’ under effective Russian control.” Such abuses included “unlawful killings, beatings, threats, arson, and looting.” The Ossetian militias apparently tailed Russian military units, probably to avoid direct confrontation with Georgia’s armed forces and to take advantage of the temporary power vacuum to ransack population centers.

The End Game

Attempts to end the war began on August 10, when Saakashvili declared his second unilateral cease-fire in two days, though Russia was not as interested in ending the conflict as Georgia was, so it dismissed the idea on the grounds that Georgia was still fighting despite Saakashvili’s declaration. On Monday, August 11, Saakashvili approved, but Russia did not accept, a plan for the cessation of hostilities brokered by high-level European officials. Finally, on Tuesday, August 12, Moscow halted its Georgian
campaign and endorsed a French-brokered cease-fire. After Russia’s approval of the plan, Georgia quickly followed suit. After the “hot” war was suspended, both sides worked to finalize the cease-fire that would provide a “framework” for de-escalating the tense situation in the region. By August 16, both parties had signed the agreement. The final draft had five points (of the original six). The fifth point proved to be the most controversial because of its vague wording: “Russian military forces must withdraw to the lines prior to the start of hostilities. While awaiting an international mechanism, Russian peacekeeping forces will implement additional security measures.” The Russian government loosely interpreted the second sentence of this point, justifying the continued Russian presence in Georgia on the grounds that it was “implement[ing] additional security measures,” so Russian soldiers continued to operate on Georgian soil for several weeks after the cease-fire. In another inflammatory move, Russia recognized both separatist enclaves as sovereign countries in the face of vehement international protest.

The Five-Day War and the events that followed created a very unpredictable and tense geopolitical atmosphere in the region, which the first Georgian-Russian peace document only partially addressed by stopping large-scale military operations. The precarious situation forced the international community to intervene again. On September 8, the presidents of Russia and France concluded an additional agreement, which stipulated that Russian soldiers leave undisputed Georgian territory by October 10 and an EU team be allowed to observe the situation as neutral arbiters. The two principal parts were carried out, and by early October a relatively stable situation emerged.
The two sides’ positions remained almost unchanged from before the conflict, except in the former Georgian-occupied territories of Akhalgori and the Kodori Gorge, which the Russians and separatists wrested from Tbilisi during the hostilities. Despite the appearance of greater stability after Russian soldiers left Georgia proper, intermittent acts of violence, like the discharge of weapons that took place close to the Georgian and Polish presidents’ convoy in mid-November, threatened to disrupt the process of normalization. Coincidentally, the verbal attacks from each side reached a fever pitch as the leaders in Moscow, Tbilisi, and the separatist capitals vied to claim the moral high ground.

**The Propaganda Campaign: The Public Relations Battle**

Before, during and after the war, the Russians, separatists and Georgians, using state-controlled media, piercing rhetoric, and symbolic, non-verbal endeavors, all attempted to justify their actions and discredit their adversaries. Though the Five-Day War drew the world’s attention to the region, each side had been participating in a protracted “propaganda war” since the early 2000s, when the U.S. began to take a more active role in the Caucasus. The Russian government started its campaign to tarnish Georgia’s reputation in earnest when it determined its influence in the region was threatened. Russia’s Caucasian policy since the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly its close relationship with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, suggests that it saw a need to increase the scale of its intervention in Georgia to counter the American presence. To help justify these bold steps, Moscow portrayed the government in Tbilisi as irrational
and a willing state sponsor of terrorism, citing the fact that numerous nefarious groups, including Chechen guerillas, had been active in the Pankisi Gorge for some time.\textsuperscript{96} Also, Russian leaders frequently accused the United States of supporting Georgian misadventures and scheming with its pro-Western leadership, which would necessitate Russian involvement in the Caucasus.

The Russian media, which is heavily controlled or monitored by the government, played a huge role in propagating these views. An article published in February 2002 by the Russian news outlet \textit{Gazeta} suggested that Osama bin Laden was not in Afghanistan, but in Georgia: “[T]he Russian officials allege that the world’s most wanted man-Saudi-born Osama bin Laden, may be hiding in the Pankisi Gorge.” Not only did this belief contradict the conclusions of the world’s intelligence organizations, it was entirely unsubstantiated, as one high-level Russian official’s statement in the same article demonstrates: “One cannot rule out that bin Laden is also hiding there amid the terrorists…I do not have information to say that is impossible.”\textsuperscript{97} The official’s case is incredibly weak, which reveals how badly Russia wanted to prove that Georgia was a terrorist haven.

In another newspaper report covering a stand-off between Georgian and Russian soldiers in Abkhazia a few months later, a Russian military official, made a similar charge:

Approximately several hundred Chechen guerrillas, international mercenaries, and Georgian partisans from the so-called detachment “The Forest Brothers” have gathered in the areas of the Kodori Gorge that the Georgian side controls. Our post was like a bone in the throat to them. That’s why unprecedented pressure was rendered—in order to get rid of the post.\textsuperscript{98}
The officer’s suggestion is consistent with the previous article’s theme of Georgia harboring terrorists. He is insinuating that Tbilisi wanted the outlaws in the Kodori Gorge to operate with impunity, which amounts to an accusation of protecting terrorist cells. These two reports were not isolated publications espousing outlandish views. As mentioned previously, in the early 2000s, the Russian leadership was seriously considering military intervention in Georgia to root out armed groups, specifically Chechens, from the Pankisi Gorge. So this interpretation of Georgia’s attitude toward terrorists was an accepted fact at the state-level.

Many Russian media outlets continued to negatively portray Georgia as relations between the two countries deteriorated. In 2002, the Russian newspaper Izvestiia posted a story that suggested that Georgia was planning to move into Abkhazia: “The Kodori Gorge is considered one of the most plausible directions of the possible invasion of Abkhazia by Georgian and Chechen guerrillas.” A quote by an Abkhazian official points to American involvement in the development of the military strategy: “I do not rule out that these plans are being worked out with the participation of the Americans.”

The second statement casts the U.S.-Georgian relationship as conspiratorial and dangerous, reflecting the Russian government’s concern that Western engagement would harm its interests in the region.

As Georgia’s infatuation with the West increased after the election of Saakashvili, the Russian media stepped up its criticism of Georgia and its foreign backers. During a diplomatic row in the fall of 2006 over the arrest of Russian officers for espionage, Russian newspapers were saturated with quotes from high-level government officials that
criticized Georgia’s action and threatened a retaliatory response. In an article titled “Tbilisi crosses the point of no return” printed by Nezavisimaia gazeta, Russian authorities lambasted Georgia’s actions as “completely out of bounds” and the charges as “absurd.” One official went as far as listing the possible responses from Russia’s armed forces: “Let the Black Sea Fleet, for example, carry out maneuvers somewhere not far from Georgia. The special forces must so some work: we have so many Georgian personages doing things that are neither understood nor completely corresponding with Russian law.” In addition, a quote from a Western expert was included to discuss the “possible ‘American footprint’ of the Tbilisi events”: “Such an operation could even have been coordinated with the USA. The Americans, including the CIA, earlier made it clear that they would oppose Russian policy in the South Caucasus.”

Statements from Georgian officials were included as well, but they were merely sound bites of information, not quotes criticizing Russian intelligence activities.

An Izvestiia article covering the same event included a plethora of quotes from the Russian government, but also added its own commentary and printed quotes meant to characterize the Georgian government negatively. When the newspaper asked a Georgian official if the inmates at the prison clapped when the Russian officers arrived, his response was printed as follows: “If this was so, then all the worse for them, - laughed Makharadze [official].” The way his answer is described makes him seem to be a cold-hearted individual who does not care about the Russians’ well-being. Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s minister of foreign affairs, makes another interesting characterization of the Georgian government in the article: “There is not a lot of money in Georgia’s budget.
Money is sent through different channels, including illegal ones from Russia, where in many cases this money has a criminal origin.”

By 2008, relations between Russia, the West and Georgia reached a new low. The language of an Izvestiia article titled “Russia will defend its fellow countrymen” published in July reflects this tense situation. Russian authorities and the article’s authors focus on the Georgian government’s overemotional temperament and, as in previous pieces, its involvement in terrorist activities. After mentioning the fact that Russian jets recently entered into Georgian airspace without permission, the authors say that the goal was “to cool the hot heads in Tbilisi.” Another blunt depiction of the Georgian leadership (and Georgians in general) exploits a stereotype of Caucasian peoples: “By logic, the war of words and local sabotage should not go further. However, the Caucasus is the Caucasus. Emotions here at times cloud the eyes. And then not only simple people, but also presidents stop living by the laws of logic.” This quote is exactly how the Russian government wanted Georgia, specifically the Georgian government, to be perceived: irrational and impulsive. This type of illustration assists in discrediting any action the Georgian leadership takes, helping the Russian government justify its decisions regarding its southerly neighbor. The breadth and intensity of the criticism directed at Georgia in Russian news outlets reflected the growing distrust and animosity between the two nations as the future war approached. In fact, the sharp nature of the language in Russian media publications in retrospect seems like an appropriate prelude to the August 2008 war.
Like the previous articles mentioned above, the journalists in the “Russia will defend its fellow countrymen” article associate the Georgian government with terrorism: “The authorities of Sukhumi [Abkhazia] are convinced that Georgian special forces organized the explosion [from a terrorist attack].” This statement is simply a reinforcement of the idea that Georgia is a state sponsor of or a perpetrator of terrorism. What is most striking about this article, though, is not the implicit and explicit criticism of Georgia, but the similarity of some of the authors’ statements compared to another piece released much earlier. In an interview posted approximately two months before this Izvestii article was published, Pavel Felgenhauer from Novai gazeta, a fiercely independent Russian newspaper, said that “the possibility of conflict is fairly high,” citing a flurry of overt Russian military movements in Abkhazia that had occurred recently. He also predicted the chronological succession of events, which is very similar to the Izvestii article’s description of what was supposedly going to happen based on Georgian media reports, though the authors of the latter dismiss the idea of a Russian attack as too outlandish, claiming that “it is difficult to believe in such a scenario.”

While the Izvestii article rejects the possibility of Russian offensive actions, it does leave open the possibility of “defensive activities.” The writers justify Russian defensive intervention as a necessary endeavor to protect Russian citizens: “Tens of thousands of Russian citizens live on the territory of Abkhazia and South Ossetia…The defense of fellow countrymen- this is an argument that the United States itself has used more than once while sending its forces to various countries. In what way are we worse?” Interestingly, the Russian government would use this argument as its principal
_casus belli_ during and after the August war. Although the many Russian news outlets, including the aforementioned _Izvestia, Nezavisimaia gazeta_ and _Gazeta_, are not directly controlled by the government, they tend to support and promulgate a pro-Kremlin stance on issues because of self-censorship and indirect pressure from the center. Thus, the portrayal of the Georgian government as an irrational Western stooge and a sponsor of terror, the speculation about what is likely or not likely to happen that favors the Russian government, and the argument for a legitimate justification for war are views that serve the Kremlin’s geopolitical ambitions because they rationalize a more interventionist policy in the Caucasus.

**The Propaganda War: Part Deux**

The Five-Day War marked a significant turning point in the war of words between the feuding sides. The rhetoric became sharper, more insulting and more combative, an indication of the importance of winning domestic and international support. The sheer rudeness of some of the statements shows that raw emotions significantly affected the discourse, and not just political calculations. The post-war propaganda campaign, though, was not confined to words. All parties also used various symbolic gestures to reinforce what was said publicly and/or printed in the media.

From the Russians’ point of view, Georgia created a situation that required their intervention. To demonstrate the necessity of Russia’s action, the Kremlin tried to prove to the world and to its citizens that Georgia’s attack was unprovoked, premeditated, and led by a hot-headed idiot supported by the West; that war crimes took place on a massive
scale; and, as a result, that the Georgian president’s hold on power was slipping and would eventually collapse in the face of an increasingly assertive opposition.

During and after the conflict, the Russian authorities did not hold back their disdain for Saakashvili. The rhetoric was both heated and calculated. In the final stages of the “hot” war, Russian President Dimitry Medvedev called the Georgian president “a lunatic.” He also placed blame on Saakashvili in less colorful terms when he said “the aggressor has been punished” as Russia’s military activity was winding down. Almost a month later, in early September, Medvedev labeled Saakashvili “a political corpse.” Such sharp language revealed the utter disdain that the Russian leadership had (and still has) for the Georgian leadership. It also showed how Russia wanted the rest of the world to see the conflict: the Georgian army, at the behest of the “lunatic” and politically impotent Saakashvili, acted in an aggressive manner that warranted some kind of “punishment.”

Do Russia’s claims stand up to the facts? The evidence suggests that Russia’s version of events is quite plausible, but the “truth” is unclear. Before and after the cessation of hostilities, Moscow was adamant that the Georgians started the conflict, when they mobilized a significant amount of forces near South Ossetia before and allegedly during their own cease-fire, and then began offensive operations against the enclave without provocation at approximately 11:30 pm on August 7. This assertion, at least the second part, is supported by O.S.C.E. officials who were stationed in Tskhinvali during the war. As stated earlier, a NYT article published in November reported that the O.S.C.E. representatives did not detect artillery barrages aimed at Georgian villages, the
principal reason cited by the Georgians for launching the salvo at Tskhinvali, despite
being close to some of the purported targets. Although this report and a subsequent
inconclusive NYT investigation of the putative bombardments directed at Georgian
population centers do not prove that this provocation did not happen, they do more to
support Russia’s claim that Georgia was the aggressor than they validate Georgia’s
account.\textsuperscript{110}

The Russian charge that the Georgian president’s 7 p.m. unilateral cease-fire
merely served to help Georgian forces prepare an attack is more difficult to answer. The
O.S.C.E.’s timeline of events, as printed in the NYT, says that at least some “massing” of
forces was taking place four hours before the 7 p.m. cease-fire.\textsuperscript{111} So did Saakashvili
really need more time to organize an attack, if that was his goal, beyond the several hours
he had available before the cease-fire? Unfortunately, this question is difficult to answer:
many variables affect how long it takes for a military unit to ready itself, and it is nearly
impossible to find out what was taking place on the ground as it relates to the Georgian
military.

The idea that the Georgian attack was completely unprovoked is challenged in an
article titled “It was not a spontaneous, but a planned war,” from Russia’s most
independent newspaper, \textit{Novaia gazeta}. According to Pavel Felgenhauer, its author,
Russia had been looking to pick a fight since April, when “the final political decision to
conclude preparations and start a war was taken.” He says that the Russians and the
separatists were seeking a “pretext” to engage in a military campaign against Georgia, so
the separatists were supposed to lure the Georgians into a fight by aggravating the
situation, which was attempted many times before the August war. Among other things, the article specifically refers to the downing of a Georgian UAV in Abkhazian airspace and the introduction of heavily-equipped military units from the Russian side in the same enclave shortly before the war began. The earlier-cited news articles in many ways lend credence to Felgenhauer’s interpretation of events. The fact that some reports questioned the Georgian government’s temperament and speculated on different war scenarios is quite a coincidence.

As further evidence of the impending conflict, as in his pre-war article mentioned previously, Felgenhauer cites a flurry of Russian military maneuvers on the Russian side of the border close to Georgia, in particular the military exercise “Caucasus 2008.” According to Russia’s Ministry of Defense, the maneuvers lasted from July 15 to August 2, and were designed to address a scenario in which international terrorist groups were attempting to form a series of bases and camps on the territory of the mountain regions of the North Caucasus to organize into bands and destabilize the situation in southern Russia. To accomplish these goals, the terrorists attempted to enter the territory of the Russia through the state border of the Russian Federation. The principal goal of the extremists was the seizure of several regions of the North Caucasus.

It is understandable that Russia’s military would be preparing its response to a terrorist attack or series of attacks, but the nature of the circumstances that Caucasus 2008 was responding to implies that there was a more conventional foe in mind. It is a stretch to say that a significant terrorist force would cross into Russia from the south and set up bases with the aim of taking over large swaths of land. In addition, since terrorists probably often operate in small groups in the difficult terrain of the North Caucasus, the participation of “around 700 units of armored vehicles (including tanks, armored war cars
and artillery equipment)” and “over 30 planes and helicopters” of various capabilities is suspicious.\(^{115}\)

Regardless of what really happened, the Russian media did its part in supporting Moscow’s version of events. One article published by Prime-Tass titled “The end of a dictator. In the fall, Saakashvili may abandon the post of president of Georgia, an expert considers,” incorporates almost all of the themes that the Russian government wanted to highlight.\(^{116}\) The title itself equates Saakashvili with tyranny and portrays him as a lame-duck, a theme that Russian media outlets constantly harped upon.

Approximately one month after the war broke out, Izvestiia ran an article called “The Opposition Demands the Resignation of Saakashvili,” which describes how the Georgian opposition viewed Saakashvili unfavorably: “They accuse the president of starting the war in Tskhinvali, demand his resignation and the conduction of early elections.”\(^{117}\) At the end of October, the government-run TV channel Pervyi Kanal printed a news brief about how a prominent Georgian opposition figure, Nino Burzhanadze, was putting pressure on the Georgian president to step down: “She [Burdzhanadze] published an open letter to Mikhail Saakashvili with the call to resign.”\(^{118}\) She did this again in late February 2009, which again was singled out by Pervyi Kanal: “Either he [Saakashvili] resigns and sets early elections, or indefinite acts of protest will start throughout the country. Such a statement was made by the ex-Speaker of the Georgian Parliament Nino Burdzhanadze.”\(^{119}\) Although these media reports support Moscow’s PR campaign against Saakashvili and, especially the first article, include language that purposefully damages his image, that does not mean that what they
say is entirely untrue. Even some in the Western press corps noted that the Georgian opposition was becoming increasingly critical of its country’s leader.\textsuperscript{120}

The Prime-Tass article also delves into Georgia’s responsibility for the war and foreign involvement. The accusation that Georgia started the war corresponds to the position of the Russian government during and long after the conflict, as previously discussed: “\textquote{The question about the political future of the two unrecognized republics of the North Caucasus became the initial cause for the war in South Ossetia, which was launched by the Georgian side.}” At the end of Prime-Tass piece, the West, specifically the United States, becomes a target. The article bluntly asserts that the Americans were behind it all: “\textquote{Such provocations in the region, created by Washington, should not be ruled out in the future.}”\textsuperscript{121} Statements like this one, which suggest that the West was colluding with Georgia and/or has a huge amount of influence in the Caucasian republic was another idea that permeated Russian news articles in the ensuing months.

In early September during a government conference, Medvedev, as quoted by Pervyi Kanal, lashed out against humanitarian shipments to Georgia, probably referring to the United States: “\textquote{Unfortunately, the situation is such that as a result of the actions of such forces, the arming of the Georgian regime is continuing, including under the guise of humanitarian aid.}”\textsuperscript{122} Although some criticism of the fact that the U.S. was using military assets to transport the supplies may have been warranted in light of the increased tension in the region, the fact that Medvedev claimed that the shipments were meant to arm Georgia without any evidence is either a clear demonstration of distrust or a calculated political statement to garner domestic support for the Russian cause.\textsuperscript{123}
The alleged heavy Western influence in the region was the subject of an Izvestiia article published in late October titled “The USA and the EU have started a geopolitical battle for Georgia.” The name of the piece implies that the West is competing amongst itself for influence in Georgia, and that Russia is being left out. It also suggests that Russia’s opposition is divided, which is eventually explicitly stated in the article: “They are serious competitors because they need Georgian territory for diametrically opposite strategic goals.” Such a statement may be true to a certain extent, but the differences between the two powers are not as great as described in the article. According to the authors, the EU needs Georgia for its location in the energy corridor, which allows Europe to tap directly into gas and oil supplies beyond the Caspian Sea. The U.S., on the other hand, wants to use Georgia “as its permanent ‘aircraft carrier’ in the region.” The authors do not explain, though, how these apparent goals are mutually exclusive. It is possible that the region could become unstable if the U.S. exclusively used Georgia as a military base, which in turn would threaten European gas and oil shipments; however, European energy security is also a U.S. strategic priority, so American and EU strategic aims may not be “diametrically opposite” as is claimed in the article.

Despite the criticism of the West that was prevalent in the Russian media and in the speech of Russia’s leaders, there were signs that Moscow did not want to back itself into a corner. In October, Medvedev played down the rift between Russia and the West while at a conference in France: “I am sure that a new ‘Fulton,’ a new rendition of the Cold War, doesn’t threaten us today.” Again, in December, the Russian president reiterated his point: “I don’t think we are on the threshold of some new version of the
Cold War. In any case, I really wouldn’t want this.\footnote{126} The intermittent “olive branch,” so to speak, offered by Medvedev hints that, while Russia was upset with the West’s support for the current Georgian regime and its presence in the Caucasus, the geopolitical climate was not going to become as poisoned as it was during the Cold War, at least between the West and Russia.

Georgian-Russian relations, however, are a different story. If the bilateral relationship between the two countries had not sunk to Cold-War levels before the war, it definitely did so after the August conflict. While the rhetoric and press reports directed at Saakashvili are a testament to this tense atmosphere, the most striking accusations were those concerning atrocities putatively committed by each party. One of the Russian government’s principal stated reasons for its military campaign was that it was acting to protect the Ossetians from genocide.\footnote{127} In order to make this argument, Russia had to somehow prove that atrocities on a massive scale were taking place. Initially, the Russian government circulated reports stating that 1600 civilians died as a result of the clashes, a number that was mentioned in many articles published in the Russian press, including a RIA Novosti piece released on August 12: “According to the data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, around 1600 people perished, and more than 30,000 became refugees.”\footnote{128}

Other news reports did not mention specific numbers. Some just gave rough, and as it turned out, high estimates. The Prime-Tass article from August 13 mentions that “several thousand peaceful inhabitants of this republic [South Ossetia] perished,” and that “[u]ntil now [August 13] the West has sluggishly reacted to Moscow’s calls to recognize
the genocide of the South Ossetian people,” but it does not give a specific number of deaths, or the source for such statistics, or explain why the West was hesitant to commit on the issue.\(^{129}\) Another source was even vaguer. In an article covering a press conference, a high-ranking Abkhazian official repeatedly claimed that the Georgians were involved in a genocidal campaign, but no numbers appear in the text: “The strictest measures of punishment must be applied to the guilty [Georgians], who committed this act of genocide.”\(^{130}\)

After comparing the Russian government’s initial statistics to the implicit uncertainty in the aforementioned articles pertaining to the alleged genocide, it seems that there was very little accurate information about how many South Ossetians had actually died during the war. Eventually, on August 20, Russian officials released a more accurate assessment of the human cost of the war. The revised number was 133 civilians killed. Interestingly, around the time Russia corrected its previous statistic, the government of South Ossetia declared that the correct figure was 1,492 civilians.\(^{131}\) Independent sources cast doubt on the latter statistic. A representative of Human Rights Watch, in response to the inflated numbers, was quoted as saying, “I don’t understand where the number of 1,500 comes from.” The same person also stated that apparently “fewer than 100” civilians lost their lives in the conflict.\(^{132}\)

Despite the revised figures, the Russian media clung to the original death toll. In a Pervyi Kanal news brief posted in late October that draws attention to evidence collected by Western sources pointing to Georgian atrocities, it was reported that the Georgians themselves were aware that a significant number of people were killed: “However, in the
lists of those who perished at the hands of Georgians soldiers in August 2008 are the names of almost two thousand citizens of South Ossetia." The fact that this number was still in the Russian press over two months after the Russian government amended the earlier toll is quite perplexing. It strongly suggests that the Russian press was doing the government’s “dirty work”: while the government maintained its credibility abroad, the media would manipulate its domestic audience.

In the same piece, there is a picture of the BBC article that the Pervyi Kanal brief addresses. The photo looks to be legitimate: only the title is translated into Russian, while the text, if one looks closely enough, is in English. However, the title is not translated properly. The original title is “Georgia accused of targeting civilians,” which indicates that some believe that it happened, though nothing has been definitively proven. The Russian translation of the title is “Georgia used weapons against a peaceful population.” This title is very equivocal, but it is most likely meant to imply that the findings were certain, when in fact the quotes and statements in the article were not very conclusive. One Human Rights Watch official, according to the original BBC article, said: “So all of this points to the misuse, the inappropriate use of force by Georgia against civilian targets [Italics added].” The opening line of the article—“The BBC has discovered evidence that Georgia may have committed war crimes in its attack on its breakaway region of South Ossetia [Italics added]”—is another example of the hesitancy that characterizes the organizations’ general conclusions derived from the evidence.

The differences between the titles are subtle, but significant. Technically, there is nothing inaccurate about the Russian version of the title. Based on the BBC article, there
is ample evidence that suggests that Georgia was guilty of the “indiscriminate use of force,” and some signs (although not as damning) that it was involved in the “deliberate targeting of civilians.” Although it is a little egregious to bluntly state that “Georgia used weapons against the peaceful population,” some civilians did die, so the statement is not false. However, the Russian title is purposefully ambiguous. Does it mean that Georgia deliberately singled out non-combatants or inadvertently killed them during legitimate military operations? The answer is initially unclear. After reading the text of the Pervyi Kanal brief, though, there is no doubt as to the intended message: “There they [Human Rights Watch] also confirmed that Georgian soldiers intentionally shot at innocent civilians.”

Another way that Russia and the separatists tried to focus attention on supposed Georgian atrocities was by announcing separate days of mourning. Abkhazia’s president, in a statementjustifying the enclave’s twenty-four hour mourning period, said that “Georgian forces illegally invaded South Ossetia” and that “genocide was unleashed against the South Ossetian people.” In a statement released on August 12, Medvedev said that Georgian military activity “constitutes genocide against the South Ossetian people” and authorized the next day as “a day of mourning in the Russian Federation.”

As discussed previously, these measures were followed by a sustained media campaign to prove (mostly using vigorous assertion) that such an atrocity occurred.

In addition to the symbolic and verbal assaults against Georgia, the governments of Russia and the separatist republics legally maneuvered to prove that their enemy committed atrocities in order to curry favor from international and domestic audiences.
Even while the shooting conflict was active, Russian authorities were already looking for definitive proof that Georgia was guilty of genocide and other war crimes. Two days before the August 12 agreement that ended the hostilities, Medvedev tasked the government to investigate suspected war crimes perpetrated by the Georgians. Two days later, Georgia countered Russia’s action by submitting official documentation to The Hague regarding ethnic cleansing of Georgians by Russian forces in early August 2008 and in the early 1990s. Although each side sensationalized acts committed by the enemy, it seems that Russian and Georgian forces were both guilty of breaking international law to a certain degree, as subsequent reports from neutral parties indicate.

The new level of intensity that characterized the post-conflict propaganda war was a sign of the importance that each country placed on its international and domestic reputations. Russia’s focus on Georgia’s purported genocide and responsibility for the conflict, despite the former’s dubious accuracy and the uncertainty surrounding the latter, were the two principal arguments that the Kremlin wanted to make.

**Third-Party Perspectives**

The exaggerated and sometimes wild accusations from all sides during the conflict lend special importance to third-party assessments that tried to determine the truthfulness of the claims. A document published in November 2008 by Amnesty International attempts to carry out such an independent analysis and evaluation of alleged war crimes. In short, the report criticizes the actions of the armed forces involved in the war, claiming that the organization’s representatives “gathered information strongly
suggesting that serious violations of international humanitarian law were committed by all parties.”

The Georgians, despite vehement protests to the contrary, were probably guilty of violating international law; however, based on Amnesty’s assessment, these transgressions were primarily due to a lack of technology and inadequate intelligence, and not malicious intent, as the Russian government would like everyone to believe. The use of imprecise GRAD rockets in the initial barrage of Tskhinvali is a good example of how old and inappropriate weapons hurt the Georgian cause. The salvo resulted in a significant amount of collateral damage and unnecessary casualties. When investigating the impact of the attacks, Amnesty personnel documented physical destruction from these projectiles “at least half a kilometre from these areas [targets].” Not only were the attacks haphazard because GRAD rockets are horrendously inaccurate, but Georgian intelligence left a lot to be desired. The report states that the information used to pinpoint targets was “outdated and imprecise.” Plus, the Georgians did not do a pre-assault check of its validity. This evidence of the indiscriminate nature of the salvo flagrantly contradicts Saakashvili’s description of it “as a precise and defensive act.” Additional statements made by Saakashvili are also questionable at best. He explained that the Georgians were not principally responsible for the damage in Tskhinvali; instead, it was the result of Russian air strikes. This charge contradicts Amnesty International’s conclusion that “[m]uch of the destruction in Tskhinvali was caused by GRADLAR MLRS (GRAD) launched rockets.” The discord between Saakashvili’s version of
events and that of a neutral third party hurts the Georgian leader’s credibility, and, as a result, helps Russia’s cause.

Amnesty’s report goes as far as “strongly suggest[ing] that Georgian forces committed indiscriminate attacks” during the fusillade that came before the ground invasion, but it is cautious in its conclusion pertaining to similar actions by Georgian soldiers that supposedly took place in Tskhinvali itself, stating that “it is difficult to say” if the Georgian army’s actions were “indiscriminate” in nature. However, other third parties seem to paint a more vivid picture of what transpired when Georgian soldiers were operating in South Ossetia. Interviews of Tskhinvali residents conducted by the BBC and Human Rights Watch in the aforementioned article “Georgia accused of targeting civilians” indicate that some Georgian tanks focused on residential structures, intentionally aiming at basements, which increased the number of civilian casualties. Although the BBC and Human Rights Watch were hesitant to say that the first-hand accounts were one-hundred percent accurate, they do damage Georgia’s credibility and, as a result, its desired “innocent-victim” image. Russia’s image and trustworthiness, which is to a certain degree inversely related to the reputation of the Georgian government, is bolstered by these types of accusations because a principal Russian casus belli was to stop Georgian atrocities against South Ossetians. However, revelations of possible Russian misdeeds were equally detrimental to Russia’s standing after the conflict. In addition, the very reports critical of Georgia that gave Russia’s image a much-needed boost, specifically the aforementioned ones, simultaneously damaged the
Russian government’s credibility because they revealed how exaggerated Russia’s earlier claims were.

**Russia and the West: What’s next?**

The Five-Day War between Russia, its separatist allies and Georgia strained Moscow’s relations with the West, particularly the United States. Georgia is the United States’ closest ally in the region, allowing American planes to fly through its airspace to support U.S. forces located in Central Asia and wanting to become a more Western-oriented country. Georgia also is a key country in the so-called energy corridor. Three major pipelines supplying gas and oil to the West pass through its territory, which reduce Russia’s stranglehold on Europe’s energy supplies. This supply diversification is an important U.S. interest because the more Europe is economically reliant on Russia, the less likely that it will support U.S. initiatives or policy if either contradicts the Kremlin’s strategic goals. Thus, when Russia responded to Georgia’s incursion into South Ossetia with a large military operation, it put short and long term U.S. geopolitical interests in jeopardy. Without an “air corridor” to support its troop presence east of the Caspian Sea, the American mission in Afghanistan would be much more difficult to accomplish. Also, the violence of the August war was a real threat to the pipelines that travel through Georgian territory. Luckily, none of them sustained any damage during the fighting. In addition to country-level consequences, the fact that in 2005 then-President Bush was lavishly greeted when he traveled to Tbilisi and eventually had a street named after him there probably made the conflict more personal.
In light of the geopolitical implications of the invasion of Georgia, it is not surprising that the American reaction to the conflict in early August was very critical of Russia. Bush was at the Olympics for much of the war, but that did not preclude him from criticizing the Kremlin’s military operation as “disproportionate.” On August 15, three days after the Russian and Georgian governments agreed to the cease-fire in principle, Bush lambasted Russia more thoroughly:

> With its actions in recent days, Russia has damaged its credibility and its relations with the nations of the free world…Bullying and intimidation are not acceptable ways to conduct foreign policy in the 21st century. Only Russia can decide whether it will now put itself back on the path of responsible nations or continue to pursue a policy that promises only confrontation and isolation.

Bush’s rhetoric clearly conveys his disapproval of Russia’s military response. He basically gives Russia an ultimatum: change course or become an international loner. On the surface, this choice seems too black-and-white; however, there may have been more truth to it than meets the eye. As Stephen Blank points out, Russia could not even garner an enthusiastic response from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Russia, China and many Central Asian states) regarding the armed campaign in its southerly neighbor and its subsequent support of the separatists’ total sovereignty. This snub is fairly significant because this grouping at times has been perceived to have “an anti-American” bent. Traditionally friendlier European states, specifically Germany, joined the chorus as well, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that “[s]ome of Russia’s actions were not proportionate.”

Criticism directed at Russia also drastically increased after it recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as sovereign countries on August 26. The Organization for
Security and Cooperation in Europe, a neutral arbiter in the region, was uncharacteristically direct after Russia made its declaration: “The recognition of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia violates fundamental OSCE principles.”\textsuperscript{158} Angela Merkel again sounded off against Russia: “The Russian decision to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia was absolutely unacceptable.”\textsuperscript{159} America’s reaction was no less severe. Bush criticized the move, declaring that “Russia’s action only exacerbates tensions and complicates diplomatic negotiations.”\textsuperscript{160} Such blunt statements by the officially neutral O.S.C.E., the United States, Germany, along with a lack of support from its “allies” in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, illustrate how out of favor Russia was after the conflict. As time wore on, though, the sharp criticism that dominated international discourse after the August war slowly abated as geopolitical realities in Europe and Washington set in.

**The Thaw**

“[N]o more ‘business as usual’” was a common phrase echoed by European leaders after the August war, and initially they held fast to this promise.\textsuperscript{161} In early September, the European Union, in an attempt to persuade Moscow to abide by the initial cease-fire, made progress toward an arguably significant bilateral treaty between the EU and Russia conditional on Russian forces moving out of Georgia “to positions they held prior to August 7th.”\textsuperscript{162} On November 10, even though the Kremlin still had not fulfilled this requirement, the EU decided to begin the process for this treaty, called a “Partnership and Cooperation Agreement,” on November 14.\textsuperscript{163} The EU’s unwillingness to follow
through on its promise is a sign of how energy reliant the continent is on Russian energy imports. Without such a strong economic incentive, it is doubtful that the EU would have been so eager to renege on its threat. This about-face was important because it showed that the prospect of normal relations is not far-fetched, despite earlier rhetoric to the contrary.

The U.S. position did not change as abruptly as the EU’s, but continued back-room dialogue indicated that the Americans were not keen on shutting out Russia. On October 21, Russian and American military leaders convened in Helsinki to talk about their respective grievances related to the Five-Day War in August, NATO-Russian ties, and transnational threats that affect both the West and Moscow. The post-meeting rhetoric from Admiral Mike Mullen implied that the U.S. recognized the need to maintain a working relationship with its former Cold-War nemesis: “Clearly the relationship has changed because of what happened in Georgia…But by no means should it end.”164 This sentiment was echoed in early December by the Secretary-General of NATO Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. After NATO chose “a conditional and graduated re-engagement” over isolation in Russian-NATO affairs, the secretary-general justified this path: “Russia is such an important factor in geopolitical terms that there is no alternative for NATO than to engage Russia.”165 Since the U.S. is the most influential member in the alliance, this was an important step, albeit an indirect one, toward re-establishing a constructive relationship with Russia.

Security issues are arguably more of a direct concern to the U.S. than economic issues in terms of its bilateral ties with Moscow because of the ongoing fight in
Afghanistan. As stated previously, America uses the Caucasus as link to its Central Asian military installations so it can continue to prosecute the war in Afghanistan. In principle, Moscow could easily disrupt this connection. A full-scale Russian invasion of Georgia would put the “air corridor” in jeopardy; and as demonstrated in early February when Kyrgyzstan declared that it was going to shut down an important U.S. base within its borders after it received a generous financial package from Moscow, Russia can entice and/or put pressure on Central Asian governments to remove American forces from their territories.166 The fact that Russia wields so much influence in two parts of the world vital to U.S. national security necessitates the existence of at least a working relationship, but better relations, obviously, are more desirable. This geopolitical necessity is why the U.S. has taken steps to mend the rift that opened up between itself and Russia after the August war, and why further engagement is inevitable.

Moscow, it seemed, was also ready to repair its damaged relationship with the United States. According to the U.S., Russia pushed for the aforementioned Helsinki conference.167 In another sign of a desire to cooperate, the day before the meeting in Finland, Russia’s top diplomat said that Moscow would not oppose prolonging America’s UN mandate in Iraq if such a measure reached the Security Council. This was an important statement because the U.S. and Iraq were still arguing over the details of the future legal status of American forces, and the only other option besides a bilateral agreement was to lengthen the existing UN legal framework beyond its expiration date, an action that required the UN Security Council’s consent.168 On February 11, Russia expressed interest in a greater role in helping NATO transport certain items to
Afghanistan, though it could only happen if “Russia and NATO fully normalize ties.”

Thus, the Russian government was (is) definitely interested in developing stronger ties with the West after the August war, but to what extent is unclear because Russia’s rhetoric and actions have at times been contradictory.

Although there were promising signs of a return to “normalcy” in Western-Russian Relations, Moscow intermittently interjected with unfriendly rhetoric and disruptive (from the West’s point of view) actions. After the election of Barack Obama, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev announced that Russia’s response to an active missile defense infrastructure would be the placement of Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad. In the same address, though, he claimed that there is “no inherent conflict with America.”

The aforementioned eviction of the American troop presence in Kyrgyzstan and the subsequent offer of increased Russian participation in the re-supplying of NATO forces in Afghanistan is another apparent contradiction. It is difficult to interpret these seemingly contradictory actions and rhetoric, but it is a good sign that Russia is at least attempting to rebuild its relationship with the West, even though the approach is at times inconsistent.

The Russian media reports covering Georgia and the August war indirectly support the idea that Russia wants to be accepted by the Western powers. The worst criticism was directed at the Georgian government, in particular Mikhail Saakashvili. Medvedev significantly never called Bush a “lunatic” or a “political corpse.” Even the most partisan Russian news reports criticized the U.S. and the West relatively mildly compared to Saakashvili. When the U.S. or the West was mentioned, the comments
mostly involved accusations of a supporting role in the conflict. The sharpest rhetoric of all had to do with the alleged genocide carried out by Georgian forces, and the West was not accused of that. There seems to be a general trend toward less criticism directed at the West, both in the media and at the government level. A Nezavisimaia gazeta article covering the annual Munich Security Conference in early February reported that “Washington is demonstrating a desire to come to an agreement with Moscow.” Also, Vice President Joseph Biden’s speech was classified as “conciliatory.” The article also emphasized the fact that Saakashvili was not given time behind the podium. An analyst was quoted as saying that “[t]he organizers made it clear that the time has arrived to reconcile and aggressive rhetoric is not necessary.”

The way that the Munich Conference is presented in this piece suggests that relations with the West have improved, but that Saakashvili is still regarded with contempt. An article written by Pavel Felgenhauer, who predicted in the spring of 2008 that an armed conflict between Georgia and Russia was imminent, supports this idea. He reports that the situation in the Caucasus is very unstable because of South Ossetia’s dire economic condition and the isolation of Moscow’s military installation in Armenia, both caused by the current stand-off. Tbilisi will not relax restrictions on cross-border traffic for either party for obvious reasons, so Russia and the separatists may resort to force. Thus, Russia still has a legitimate reason to continue to lambaste President Saakashvili, and will probably do so until there is a change of leadership in Tbilisi.
The Five-Day War in its Historical Context

How does the August conflict fit into Georgian history? It certainly is an important event in a geopolitical sense because its consequences have affected the politics of some of the world’s most powerful countries. The U.S. commitment to the region has been challenged, Russia’s international standing has worsened, and the vulnerability of the region to conflict has been re-confirmed. It also reveals how critical the region has become in the last two decades. As Svante E. Cornell notes, “[T]he South Caucasus has gained importance through its strategic location and its energy resources” and, as a result, “the South Caucasus is no longer a backwater of international politics.” Thus, the present situation in many respects resembles an earlier time in Georgian history, when the region was hotly contested by competing empires from almost every direction because of its location on their respective peripheries.

This analogy, though, is not perfect. Although Georgia to a large extent is still located on the edge of many spheres of influence, the historical contests for dominance in the (South) Caucasus mostly concerned foreign powers looking to expand their territories. Russia, at least in a physical sense, is in a position to do this today, though a complete annexation of Georgia is highly unlikely because of the political ramifications. The West, on the other hand, is almost entirely geographically removed from the Caucasus, which makes a “land grab” just as far-fetched. In place of pure territorial expansion by near neighbors, today’s geopolitical jostle is more about influence for the sake of economic, security and/or revanchist interests, at times involving powers thousands of miles away.
Russia’s relatively close proximity to and its historical ties with Georgia may partially make up for its smaller geopolitical clout, so the contest has been a fierce struggle. As a result, Saakashvili represents a direct threat to Russian influence in the region because he tips the scales in favor of the West. This new development may explain why the Russian media and government have treated him so harshly, especially after the August war when they detected an opportunity to permanently tarnish his image. From the Russian point of view, a certain amount of Western influence may be inevitable, as Georgian history suggests, but a complete orientation toward the West is not palatable. This idea may be the key lesson of the Five-Day War: Georgia is inherently torn between spheres of influence, so when the balance shifts too much in favor of one party, there will most likely be an attempt to restore a “comfortable” equilibrium. Some, after noticing Russia’s growing assertiveness in the Caucasus, have interpreted the Kremlin’s effort to restore this balance as the beginning of a new Cold War. The West has experienced sharp criticism in the Russian media and from government officials, but the fact that this has somewhat subsided is an indication that the real problem is Saakashvili. Thus, the so-called “new Cold War” may be primarily between a renegade former Soviet Republic and its former taskmaster, which means that a long-term geopolitical “cold spell” is not inevitable. In fact, since there is such a strong need for a robust relationship along economic and security lines between Russia and the West, the Five-Day War may ultimately be interpreted as a painful, yet essentially insignificant event in the history of Western-Russian relations.
Notes


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9Suny, The Making, 36.

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11Ibid., 31.


13Lang, A Modern History, 32.

14Ibid., 32.


20 Lang, *The Last Years*, 173, 176; Ibid.


23 Lang, *A Modern History*, 41.

24 Ibid., 66-67.


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31 Ibid., 192.


35Ibid., 350.

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