

REALPOLITIK AND THE RUSSIA-GEORGIA WAR: THREE YEARS ON

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Introduction

In November 2011, in a dramatic departure from the original claims of the Russian troops rescuing the inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Tbilisi's genocidal actions, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev acknowledged the real reason behind the Russian invasion

of Georgia in August 2008. Speaking on 21 November, 2011 at the headquarters of Russia's 58th army of its Southern Military District located in Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia, Medvedev noted: "If we had faltered in [August] 2008, geopolitical arrangement would be different now and number of countries in respect of which attempts were made to artificially drag them into the North Atlantic Alliance, would have probably been there [in NATO] now."¹

This was no slip-up, as Medvedev continued to push this line later on the same day. When interviewed in Rostov on the same day, he further confirmed: "Today I already spoke with the army officers and I will tell it to you too that it was of course a very difficult page in our recent history, but, unfortunately, it was absolutely necessary [decision]. And the fact that Russia's actions at the time were so tough has eventually secured a situation for us, which, despite of all the difficulties, is now quieter than it was..."

"We have simply calmed some of our neighbors down by showing them that they should behave correctly in respect of Russia and in respect of neighboring small states. And for some of our partners, including for the North Atlantic Alliance, it was a signal that before taking a decision about expansion of the Alliance, one should at first think about the geopolitical stability. I deem these [issues] to be the major lessons of those developments in 2008."²

Medvedev's acknowledgment validated what most Russia-watchers in the West suspected, but few cared to admit: Russia's war against Georgia was motivated by the age-old *realpolitik* considerations, and not humanitarian sentiments toward some obscure mountainous peoples. The Russians had apparently decided to stop NATO enlargement by force, and according to Medvedev, the outgoing Russian president, that achievement was a highlight of his presidency. Western allies could respond with nothing of substance, and quietly allowed Mos-

cow to dismember Georgia, the most outspoken pro-American and pro-Western state. This was not the first time when policies of appeasement were offered to an aggressive expansionist state, but it was definitely new for the post-Cold War era.³

After the fall of the so-called "Evil Empire," most political scientists counted on a peace dividend, whereby standing down from permanent high alert would save on defense costs. However, the outbreak of numerous local and regional conflicts that resulted from newly found freedom from oppressive regimes has presented a far greater challenge than could ever have been expected. Complicating matters were that this supposed peace occurred in a sea of unpredictability that was markedly different than the stability of the bipolar world of the very tense but also predictable Cold War. The Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 was the result of the confluence of age-old tensions and *realpolitik* worldviews that were masterfully played in the old capital of the former Evil Empire.⁴ Three years after the war, and through an understanding of the historical background, one can see how the confluence of *realpolitik* and hegemony created a necessity for both the Russians and the Georgians to act the way they did, though Georgia was probably more justified in its actions than Russia.⁵ Georgia erred in the planning, timing, and executing its policies and action in the rebel areas, but it was the Russians who violated the international principles of

³ Ironically, before the war, Vladimir Putin chose Munich to announce a Russian comeback and deliver stern warnings to the West in February 2007 (see: O. Rolofs, "A Breeze of Cold War," Munich Security Conference, available at [http://www.securityconference.de/Putin-s-speech.381+M52087573ab0.0.html]). After the war, the report prepared by the so-called Tagliavini commission served as an example of appeasement at work: the commission concluded that it was Georgia that started the August war (see: "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," 2 December, 2008, available at [http://www.ceiig.ch/]).

⁴ See: S.E. Cornell, S.F. Starr, "Introduction," in: *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. by S.E. Cornell, S.F. Starr, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 2009.

⁵ See: P. Felgenhauer, "After August 7: The Escalation of the Russia-Georgia War," in: *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*.

¹ "Medvedev: The August War Stopped Georgia's NATO Membership," *Civil Georgia*, 21 November, 2011, available at [http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24168].

² Ibidem.

non-intervention and territorial integrity, with world's other great powers turning a blind eye. Russia's attack on Georgia and the subsequent dismemberment of the Georgian state was the first instance since the Cold War of a major power uni-

laterally attacking and dismembering a smaller neighbor. This sad precedent took place within a context of Russia not even trying to gain a measure of international support for its actions—a new low even for Russia.

Conflict in the Caucasus

The Caucasus has been at the crossroads of civilization since it spread beyond the Fertile Crescent; and within this context it has become relatively recently the gateway to Russia and its old empire, worrying Czars from Catherine the Great and Nicholas to despots such as Stalin and Khrushchev.⁶ Georgia's strategic geographic significance has made it of paramount importance to Russia, but it holds even more worth in the Russian psyche as evidenced by unusually tense, vulgar and emotionally charged anti-Georgian rhetoric heard in the country since 2003.⁷ The range of violent emotions that Georgia has generated in Russia during last eight years or so is truly remarkable as since the end of the Cold War no other country in the world has come even close to becoming an addressee of so much hateful and vile discourse in the Russian capital.⁸

Given its location, the Caucasus is much like the Balkans, though due to a traditional Euro-centric preoccupation in security and defense affairs, not many Western scholars are well versed in the history and importance of the region. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the Russian Federation, newly opened or re-discovered trade and pipeline routes, as well as the democratic awakening of many post-Soviet and Middle Eastern countries the region commands closer attention. Regrettably, most Westerners hear mostly of the problems with Russia and its struggles with the separatists in the Republic of Chechnia, and some of the horrors associated with this struggle from the school siege in Beslan to subway bombings in Moscow. Indeed, the Russian Federation is facing much more serious problems than is evident from superficial examination, but America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have distracted many from taking note of a region that is the keystone in the structure of civilization between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.⁹

Conflict in the Caucasus ignited parallel to those in the Balkans, as many tensions that were quelled or fermented under communist rule were now free to fester to their natural progression. In the late 1980s, a series of conflicts in the Caucasus were opened with the Armenian-Azerbaijan rivalry over the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region—geographically part of Azerbaijan, but predominantly populated by Armenians, this province waged a bloody war of secession. This example was followed by northern Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which have previously enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy within Georgia, but decided to pursue full independence through violent military uprisings, with much encouragement and military support from Moscow. As the Soviet system was breaking up, these three separatist regions in the Southern Caucasus, along with Chechnia in the Northern Caucasus, opted to follow “the parade of sovereignties” of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslav republics. However, unlike the Union republics, the basic constituent parts of the U.S.S.R. and Yugoslavia, autonomous entities did not have legal or constitutionally

⁶ See: S. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, 1993, pp. 22-49.

⁷ See: M. Lipman, “‘Enemy’ Schoolchildren in Moscow,” *The Washington Post*, 21 October, 2006.

⁸ See: A. Illarionov, “The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008,” in: *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*.

⁹ See: Ch. King, “Tbilisi Blues,” *Foreign Affairs*, 25 August, 2004.

established rights to sovereignty. Therefore, Karabakh, Abkhazia, Chechnia, South Ossetia (alternatively known as the Tskhinvali region), and later Kosovo, resorted to violent struggles to establish themselves as *de facto* sovereign entities. All these conflicts subsided or were effectively frozen by the beginning of the new century, but uncertainty and tensions surrounding them continue to linger over the heads of decision-makers in world's great powers. In Georgia, tensions were furthered as the central government tried to resolve frozen conflicts—the restoration of Georgia's borders, national unity, and authority as a part of the platform that brought Mikheil Saakashvili into office.¹⁰

Interestingly enough, the frozen conflicts in Georgia were reignited by the closing of a black market at the border of the secessionist minded region.¹¹ The ruling group in Tskhinvali used legal black hole of its own creation, and the desire by the Shevardnadze government to keep things peaceful, and engaged in black market operations at a massive scale, which enriched unscrupulous entrepreneurs in Ossetia, Russia, and Georgia, but diverted huge amounts from Georgia's budget, and allowed for hazardous products to be sent to the Russian market.¹² Ironically, this sensible and legal action by the Saakashvili government prompted the South Ossetia to utilize force in response,¹³ and alarmed its patrons in Moscow. It is very likely that the shutting down of the *Bodbe* market in 2004 benefited Russian interests as much as it did Georgia's. Regardless, bringing black market operations within proper legal and political channels also signaled the new Georgian government's desire to strengthen the central government, increase its efficiency, and bring the revenue collection within the parameters of a responsible government. This act also went in contravention to the age-old Russian/Soviet policies toward the Caucasus, and their other dependencies or semi-dependencies: such acts had to be cleared with Moscow first—this Saakashvili did not do. The Soviet authorities even practiced forced relocations, and a denial of national identity in the Caucasus and elsewhere in order to quell local initiative and keep local leaders subservient.¹⁴ This attitude by the central Russian/Soviet government for centuries has been informed by a strong belief in *realpolitik* embedded within a framework of assumed superiority of Russian, “central,” politics over everything initiated by governments of much smaller “tributary nations.” *Realpolitik* alone would be unbearable for Russia's neighbors in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, but its fusion with the traditional Russian feudal paradigm of master-slave relationship makes Moscow's desire to lord over its smaller neighbors intolerable.

Conflict is not a new phenomenon in the Caucasus. The region and its intricacies have confounded rulers from Greats such as Peter and Catherine to Ottoman Sultans alike.¹⁵ Ever since the ancient Argonauts traveling to western Georgia to capture the golden fleece, the Caucasus has been a target of emerging, expanding or declining empires: the Athenian, the pagan Roman, the pagan Persian, the Turk-Seljuk, the Mongol, the Ottoman Turk, the Arab, the Byzantine, and the Russian, to name a few. Peoples of the Caucasus fought and resisted them all, especially the Georgians and the Chechens—they seldom extended welcome to foreign empires. Struggle with the invaders involved all forms of warfare, and centuries of battles in the region have witnessed all sorts of engagements, from decisive battles to decades-long low scale insurgencies. Foreign invasions, and often invasions of more than

¹⁰ See: Ch. King, *op. cit.*

¹¹ South Ossetia continued to be a black market hub after the August war (see: “Six Months after Caucasus War: South Ossetia Becomes Thorn in Russia's Side,” *Spiegel Online International*, 24 December, 2008, available at [<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,598311-2,00.html>]).

¹² See: R. Ratliff, “South Ossetian Separatism in Georgia,” *ICE Case Studies*, No. 180, May 2006, available at [<http://www1.american.edu/ted/ice/ossetia.htm>].

¹³ See: Ch. King, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ See: A. Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, Doubleday, Washington, D.C., 2003.

¹⁵ See: J. Winik, *The Great Upheaval*, Harper, New York, NY, 2007.

one empire at the same time, also witnessed temporary and shifting alliances between local powers and the invaders. Even without foreign empires, peoples of the Caucasus are quite able to generate conflicts among themselves, and great outside powers traditionally have fuelled such conflicts by taking sides, pitting one faction against another, and forcing them to adopt irreconcilable positions. In a similar way, the current Russian engagement in the Caucasus strives to set the Ossetians and the Abkhazians against the Georgians, as well as tries to exploit for its own advantages animosities and rivalries in the Northern Caucasus, and between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Russian *Realpolitik*

Vladimir Putin, Russia's undisputed leader since 2000, is an excellent example of a Russian-style practitioner of *realpolitik* at work. Putin has skillfully exploited weaknesses of the Georgian government, and inexperience and naïve approaches to international affairs by its leadership. Putin has not hidden his nostalgia for the Soviet Union, and has often made references to former military glory and international influence of the communist superpower.¹⁶ Most memorably, Putin pronounced a homily to the U.S.S.R., and blamed everything bad in Russia on its demise right after the thoughtless hostage rescue operation by the Russian authorities in Beslan, North Ossetia, where in September 2004 hundreds of children perished at the hands of Chechen terrorists, the Russian Special Forces, and local vigilantes.

Hans Morgenthau notes that every competitive system maintains an equilibrium within its own set of rules, and that the anarchy that comprises the international system of states is no different.¹⁷ If this assertion is correct at the level of international regions, one could see how Mikheil Saakashvili's thrust of joining NATO, distancing from Russia, and attempting to restore the country's lost territorial integrity could have triggered reactionary responses from Russia. Actions by the Georgian government were perceived as upsetting the existing equilibrium by provoking a response from Russia, the local regional hegemon. A Russian response had been expected especially one considers Saakashvili's efforts concerning Georgia joining NATO, the organization viewed with great suspicion in Russia to this day, and becoming part of "the West."¹⁸ The response proved to be of dramatic proportions for Georgia, and perhaps Moscow's highly charged emotionally rhetoric that had preceded it served as psychological preparation for military action.

Saakashvili definitely felt that it was right time for him to act, but it remains a mystery as to why the conflict was unleashed in early August 2008, when the Russian troops were already massed at Georgia's northern borders and the Ossetian rebels were evacuating civilians from the areas that subsequently witnessed battles. The Russian air force had deployed hundreds of fighter jets to the airbases just across the border with Georgia, and was keeping them armed and battle-ready for days with live missiles and bombs attached to the planes. Most likely Saakashvili hoped for a strong support by the West, and it is equally likely that he had false and misleading assurances from Moscow as well. Regardless the motive, Moscow used the opportunity to its full advantage by capturing 20 percent of Georgia, and blaming violence on the United States and the West. Russia discovered it could do any-

¹⁶ See: A. McDuffee, "Boehner: Russia's Putin 'Harbors Intense Soviet Nostalgia'," *The Washington Post*, 25 October, 2011, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/think-tank/post/boehner-russias-putin-harbors-intense-soviet-nostalgia/2011/10/25/gIQAtpOGGM_blog.html].

¹⁷ See: H. Morgenthau, K. Thompson, D. Clinton, *Politics Among Nations*, McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 7th Edition, 2005.

¹⁸ "After the War," *The Economist*, 16 October, 2008.

thing it wanted.¹⁹ Neither the United States nor any other Western power was in a mood to seriously quarrel with Russia—it might have been a shocking surprise to many, but Russia has remained a formidable military adversary even after the dissolution of the “Evil Empire.”

Saakashvili committed a terrible error of judgment, which turned fatal for hundreds of peaceful Georgians. This fatal misstep could have caused far greater number of casualties had the Russians not been persuaded to stop at the outskirts of Tbilisi. *Realpolitik* explains Russian behavior well, and this was reflected in Condoleezza Rice’s comments after her negotiations with the Russian leadership. U.S. Secretary of State commented that Russia appeared to have unlimited military goals, which she termed as unacceptable, implying that Moscow was poised to capture the capital city and overthrow the Georgian government by force.

Russia has definitely taken a *realpolitik* approach to its relations in the Caucasus, especially in terms of using the renegade entities in the region for its own ends. The current Russian policy has been a brainchild of the former and future president Vladimir Putin, currently Prime Minister. Under Putin, Moscow started viewing potential clash areas in Georgia as a means to upset U.S. and Western progress in the region. Since the collapse the Soviet Union, no other issues in Moscow’s relations with the West have been more upsetting to the Kremlin than Western “encroachment” to the areas previously unilaterally dominated by Russia. NATO enlargement aside, Moscow has been the most adamant about its current hegemony over the Black Sea region, which brings Georgia and Ukraine into the same equation of power struggle with Moscow. Outwardly Western orientation of Presidents Yushchenko and Saakashvili, their desire to join NATO, and the EU, and the phenomenon of Colored Revolutions that has put these people in power—all these and other related issues have fuelled anti-Western sentiments in Moscow. “Losing” both Ukraine and Georgia for Moscow would mean losing political, economic, and especially military dominance over the Black Sea, the only warm sea access for the Russian Navy. This would eventually translate into Russia losing its great power capabilities and status. To avert that probability, Moscow had to send a strong message to the West, punish the “misguided” leaders in Tbilisi and Kiev, and reestablish a firm military grip over the Black Sea. By winning war in Georgia, and subsequently “winning” the presidential elections in Ukraine, Moscow has achieved all of the above. The Georgian leadership has failed specifically countering the Russian plans in the region—they have naively or misguidedly believed in the ultimate value of international assurances and accords basing their hopes primarily on public images, ideological rhetoric, and diplomatic talks, rather than military power and material capabilities.

Neorealist theories of Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin concerning political structures²⁰ and hegemonic stability are closely intertwined as hegemons commonly influence the political structure *they are* part of. In the case of the Russia-Georgia relations, Georgia had been taking advantage of the revamping international system, the perceived weakness of Russia after the fall of communism.²¹ The Georgian leadership was probably trying to prevent a Russian comeback in the region by quickly reintegrating with the West—ironically, they have achieved the opposite result. It is very likely that the Russian leadership was reasoning along the same lines, and Moscow saw it urgent and necessary to act before it was too late. The denial of the Membership Action Plan (MAP)—a roadmap for joining the alliance—by the Bucharest NATO summit in June 2008 acted as a go-ahead signal for Moscow. Regardless, no matter how in the right Georgia was, those in power in Tbilisi and elsewhere had to know Russia would one day try to reassume the mantle of leadership in the region by force. Historically, the Russians had come back from defeat after defeat after defeat to become one of two centers

¹⁹ Ch. King, “Putin’s Putsch,” *Foreign Affairs*, 22 September, 2004.

²⁰ See: K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, McGraw-Hill, 1979.

²¹ See: Ch. King, “Tbilisi Blues.”

of military power in the world; Russia would try to rise again to protect areas of its vital interests no matter the circumstances.

The vacuum of political power left by the fall of the Berlin Wall certainly was seized by some, as the presence of an illiberal hegemonic power in the region had for centuries quelled any opportunity for self-rule or the development of free institutions.²² The Soviet Union's history of exerting total control over its citizens to the point of robbing them of any cultural identity created a very rigid hegemonic stability situation. By doing their best to relieve people of their heritage and identities, the Soviets were able to stunt the development of nations in these areas allowing the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to exercise extraordinary power and control over vast areas.²³ In a sense, the Soviet Union was an exception in the annals of history's great powers in terms of achieving so much control over so many historically distinct nations of the world. Generally, great power influence does not exceed vital political, military and economic considerations, while the Soviets tried to re-shape cultural identities of communities under their domination. The dissolution of the Soviet Union should be seen as a correction of that abnormal and excessive great power domination model rather than Russia's complete retreat from its great power status.

Russia has always been pursuing a hegemonic power status from Peter the Great and Czarist times to Bolshevik totalitarianism to the current "republic." It should be noted that the Russian Empire truly acquired a European great power status after it gained access to and secured its presence in the Black Sea region. The story of the expansion of the Russian state in any one direction is a story of continuing military hostilities with its neighbors—its wars with the Ottoman Empire and its allies, as well as the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus, testify specifically to the importance of Russia's naval presence in the south. So it should not have been entirely unexpected that in the opening decade of the 21st century Russia, a country with only one rival in strategic arms, would undertake unilateral military action to preserve its status in the vital region. Russia's success in pursuing *realpolitik* and making headway through military means highlighted weaknesses of the Western alliance and its inability to protect a like-minded state. The significance of this point cannot be understated: such events give much hope to the proponents of high fences and rigid boundaries not only in Russia, but also in countries like Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, and elsewhere. If the U.S. could be deterred by attacking and quickly defeating its smaller ally, most certainly it would encourage those in similar geographic and political circumstances to both build up their military and be more aggressive toward their pro-American neighbors. The current nuclear stand-off between Israel and Iran, the latter continuing its work on nuclear arms despite the promises made and the sanctions imposed, would be a case in point.

Upsetting the *Status Quo*?

America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq though necessary to combat Islamic extremism contributed to this destabilized system, and provided opportunity for Russia to reacquire its hegemonic status. America, as the leading Western power, and one among very few (alongside Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) not suffering from colonial guilt is currently unable to assist its allies in need, such as Georgia. Although advocating for Georgia's entry to NATO in return for gracious and quality support in Iraq and Afghanistan, all the U.S. could do during the war was offer humanitarian support in

²² See: R. Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1987.

²³ See: N. Sharansky, *Defending Identity: Its Indispensable Role in Protecting Democracy*, Public Affairs, New York, NY, 2008.

the form of C-17 cargo planes, with the 3rd Airlift Squadron from Dover, Delaware, leading the way. The slow deployment of U.S. and NATO warships also gave a signal of hope to Georgia; however, the United States did stop short from violating the Montreux Convention on the status of the Black Sea, a holy cow of naval security for both the Russians and the Turks.

The process of Moscow reasserting itself as a hegemonic power has been slow and deliberate. This drive has materialized in the form of the brutal suppression of uprising in Chechnia, which pretty much bordered with policies of genocide, the alleged killings of whistleblowers in Great Britain, and Russia, contract killings of dissident journalists, the alleged poisoning of Orange Revolution architect Viktor Yushchenko, the power play over energy deprivation and finally the invasion of Georgia and “freeing” the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²⁴ The invasion and dismemberment of Georgia has underlined weaknesses and shortcomings of U.S. and Western policies toward Russia, which the Obama “Reset” policies were supposed to address. The “Reset” approach sought to pacify the Russians primarily through various concessions, including abandoning concerns for Georgia’s defense and security, walking away from the missile defense plans in Eastern Europe, turning the blind eye on gross human rights violations in Russia, and more recently, pressing Georgia to clear a way for Russia’s joining the World Trade Organization. So far Moscow’s bets have been right on: the Obama administration’s hastily devised and immature “Reset” to the Kremlin all but ignores the future of the Black Sea basin, and relegates the United States and the West into a groveling posture.²⁵ The awkwardly named “Reset” button²⁶ is manifesting itself in ways that are actually a direct opposite of what its name originally implied in Russian—the United States is unloading its Russia-related problems by letting Moscow have its way in its immediate neighborhood.

The current Russian approach attains two key diplomatic positions within the framework of *realpolitik*. The first is state’s position of strength when trying to accomplish anything utilizing diplomatic tools, from trade, resource or travel agreements to relations concerning arms, defense, and even war. This position ensures a strong likelihood of coming out a winner in any negotiation or contest, no matter the subject. Additionally, Moscow’s unchallenged saber rattling would ultimately result in smaller countries, neighbors of Russia, either siding with it or acquiescing to its policies, as they now know who holds the upper hand in the region. Second, Russia’s continuing assertion of dominance in the Black Sea basin all but guarantees intervention in the internal affairs of Georgia or any other state in the region—it could be triggered by overtures of oppression from local pro-Russian groups or “Russian language speakers” requiring assistance. The 2008 Russo-Georgian war will not be the last one as there is no sign of Moscow dramatically changing its attitude toward the former Soviet Union, and its smaller neighbors are less than willing to roll over and die at Kremlin’s request. Russia’s bravado and position of strength coupled with the relative weakness and various preoccupations of the West cemented a win-win scenario for Russia.²⁷ It has been a win-win for the aforementioned reasons of shoring up its power base not only in the Caucasus but vis-à-vis Brussels and Washington as well.²⁸

Shortcomings and errors of the Georgian leadership are undeniable as a small and asymmetrically equipped country could not have possibly won a war against the second greatest military power

²⁴ See: A. Karatnycky “Ukraine’s Orange Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2005.

²⁵ See: “In Search of Détente, Once Again,” *The Economist*, 2 July, 2009.

²⁶ The “button” was presented by State Secretary Clinton to Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivanov at their meeting in Geneva. The “button” sported “Reset” in English, but in Russian it read “Peregruzka,” that is “overload,” instead of the proper “Perezagruzka.”

²⁷ See: O. Ramsbotham, T. Woodhouse, H. Miall, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, Polity Press, Malden, MA, 2005.

²⁸ Russia delivered in short order after Putin issued threats in February 2007. Putin’s full speech in English is available at *The Washington Post* website: “Putin’s Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy,” Monday, 12 February, 2007, available at [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>].

in the world. The arguments subsequently voiced in Georgia pointing out that Tbilisi was surprised and unprepared for such a response from Russia are precisely a case in point. Russia opted to act aggressively in order to generate immediate benefits for itself, it did not necessarily act to benefit the peoples of Tskhinvali and Abkhazia. Despite their self-proclaimed independence, guaranteed by nothing but the Russian gun, the long-term prospects and future for these peoples remain uncertain at best. Georgia will not abandon its claims over the ancient lands of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, which together constitute around 20 percent of country's territory. The long-term problem of these two Georgian provinces is by no means solved, despite the assurances to the contrary by the Russians. Prior and during the events of August 2008, the Georgian leadership committed many errors of judgment, but it was the Russians who chose to flat out violate the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity.²⁹ Unless the disputes around Sukhumi and Tskhinvali are solved, this kind of behavior by Tbilisi and Moscow will likely continue in the coming decades, until one of the sides is no longer able or willing to pursue the established pattern.

Conclusion

The November 2011 "elections" in the Tskhinvali region once again demonstrated that "sovereignty" of the local self-proclaimed state is just a glorified façade for Russian rule. When the opposition candidate soundly defeated Moscow's hand-picked candidate, the election results were annulled by a local court citing but never demonstrating evidence for widespread "irregularities."³⁰ No matter how hard the Abkhaz and Ossetian separatists wish, their provinces will never be sovereign and independent. Despite the "recognition" of their independence by Russia, and heavy deployment of Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in essence, these remain frozen conflicts ready to ignite anytime. The road to conflict can be forestalled or missed completely by a wise reading of the political and economic landscape, and applying what power one has where it can. After more than a decade of exerting authority in the Caucasus as an up and coming power, Georgia was met with the fist of Russian force after some missteps by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and a move by NATO to flank Russia. The latest in a string of conflicts to confound an expected "peace dividend" after the Cold War, this conflict illustrated how the dynamics of the Cold War bi-polar world order are not entirely dead and gone. Russia remains a viable hegemonic power, and is more willing to use its hard power than China, and more effective in bang for the buck than the United States. The geographic location of smaller Georgia remains instrumental in Russia's interest, as it provides a backdrop of Russia defending its territory from not only Western dominance, but also from other potential threats arising elsewhere.

²⁹ See: M.W. Janis, J.E. Noyes, *International Law: Cases and Commentary*, Thomson West Publishing, St. Paul, MN, 1997.

³⁰ See: "Protests Continue in Tskhinvali," *Civil Georgia*, 5 December, 2011, available at [<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24231>].