RUSSIA’S KOSOVO:
A CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS OF THE AUGUST WAR OVER SOUTH OSETIA

Dr Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail),
School of Public and International Affairs,
Virginia Tech,
National Capital Region,
Alexandria, VA 22314.


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I would like to thank the following for helpful comments on this draft: Valery Dzutsev, Vladimir Kolossov, John O’Loughlin and Arthur Tsutsiev. This research was supported by the US National Science Foundation (grant number 0433927) through its Human and Social Dynamics program. Thanks also to Jeff Owen for research assistance.

“We are much more worried by Georgian imperialism than Russian imperialism. It is closer to us, and we feel its pressure all the time.”

The brief war between Georgian government forces and those of the Russian Federation in the second week of August 2008 was the largest outbreak of fighting in Europe since the Kosovo war in 1999. Hundreds died in the shelling and fighting which left close to two hundred thousand people displaced from their homes (UNHCR, 2008). The conflict was initially over South Ossetia but spread to incorporate Akhkhazia. Both were quasi-states, unrecognized statelets that were de jure part of the Georgian state but acquired de facto independent status in the early 1990s (Kolsto, 2006). After an initial Georgian attack on South Ossetia, a Russian-led counterattack pushed back the Georgian forces and inflicted significant infrastructural damage across Georgia. Russian troops then pushed beyond the boundaries of the quasi-states and proceeded to occupy considerable territory within Georgia proper1 before finally withdrawing in October 2008. On 26 August, the Russian government recognized the two quasi-states as independent states, the first member of the international community to do so and since joined only by Nicaragua.

The war caused a crisis in relations between the Russian Federation and Euro-Atlantic institutions, with many politicians and commentators reaching for Cold War analogies and comparisons. But the war also caused division within the European Union and NATO, with some state officials taking a more critical approach to the Georgian government’s role in the war than others. The media conjured a plethora of geopolitical visions and analogies to constitute the moment: the ‘rewakened bear,’ the ‘return of the cold war,’ and the ‘new age of authoritarianism’ (Freeland, 2008). The South Ossetian war, however, was more an acceleration of already existent tensions in Russian Euro-Atlantic relations than a rupture. There were many events over the previous decade where relations deteriorated: the Kosovo war (March-April 1999), the abdication of the ABM Treaty by the US (December 2001), the Yukos affair (October 2003-December 2005), Gazprom’s brinkmanship with Ukraine and Georgia over gas and oil supplies, the Alexander Litvinenko poisoning in London (November 2006), the suspension of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (December 2007) and ongoing tensions over US anti-ballistic missile deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic. For many military analysts, Putin’s speech in Munich condemning ‘unipolarity’ in February 2007 was a noteworthy re-assertionist moment that launched a year where Russia ‘flexed its muscle,’ a trope symbolized literally by widely distributed pictures of a bare-chested Putin fishing and symbolically by the resumption of long range flights by Russia’s aging strategic bombers (Wagstyl, 2007). If the latter move recalled the Cold War, the image of former Soviet T-72 tanks rolling into and occupying a sovereign country on its borders made that metanarrative irresistible to many, and marked a new low in relations. Geopolitical division and sphere of influence thinking were back as was self-righteous moral outrage. As Vice President Cheney reprised rhetoric about “the expansion of free governments and democratic values” as a threat to no country’s interests, Russian President Demetri Medvedev spoke of the Caucasus as a ‘region of privileged interest’ for the Russian Federation (Cheney, 2008, Clover, 2008) (see also Miliband, 2008 #170).

This paper is an initial overview of the South Ossetian conflict from a critical geopolitical perspective. Critical geopolitics breaks from classic great power competition conceptions of geopolitics

1 It is conventional to use the term ‘Georgia proper’ to refer to Georgian territory which had no special administrative status during the Soviet Union and afterwards.
in a number of ways (Ó Tuathail, 2006). First, critical geopolitics has a much broader notion of the geographic in geopolitics which, in classic geopolitical talk, is often trapped in state-centricism, trite earth-labeling metaphors (‘the arc of crisis’) and narratives about resource wars. Critical geopolitics begins from the messiness of places in world affairs and the inability of state-centric logics to capture the connectivities, flows and belongings that characterize particular locations. Geographies are multidimensional and plural, mediated by techno-scientific networks, economic connectivities and bonds with transcend borders. Second, critical geopolitics is sensitive to the importance of localized context and agency in world affairs. These factors are often marginalized and silenced by standard geopolitical discourse which interprets local dramas through great-power categories and preoccupations. Third, critical geopolitics challenges the lazy strategies of othering found in conventional geopolitical discourse – the essentializing, excoticizing and totalizing of places, evident in frames such as ‘evil empire’ (Agnew, 2003) – and reveals how geopolitical storylines construct the meaning of events in international affairs in ways that prejudice policy options and solutions. Critical geopolitics treats geopolitics as an interpretative practice embedded in traditions and cultures of geopolitical thinking (Ó Tuathail, 2006). In deconstructing the binaries of traditional geopolitics (whether realist or neoconservative), it is itself a form of geopolitical practice, one that intervenes to emplot narratives and makes arguments for certain conceptions and policies against others. This paper is a start in developing some critical geopolitical thinking about the August 2008 war.

BACKGROUND TO THE CRISIS

The South Ossetian war was at the conjuncture of a series of legacies and tendencies at the local, state, regional and international level. While the crisis has a long history, the key legacy is that from the breakup of the Soviet Union.

South Ossetia: Legacies of Violence.

South Ossetia was recognized as a separate ethnonterritorial region by the Soviet Georgian republic in April 1922, a lesser status – autonomous oblast (AO) – than Abkhazia and Adjaria which were to become autonomous socialist Soviet republics (ASSR) within Georgia (Abkhazia only in 1931 after losing its status as a Dogovornaya [Treaty] autonomous Soviet republic). It gained this status due to its distinctive ethnic composition and history as an oppositional region to a centralizing Georgian state. Tualläg Ossetians were a majority in many but not all of the region’s villages and had close ties to their ethnic brethren in North Ossetia but the regional capital, Tskhinvali had a majority Georgian population at the time. The region’s peasants, actively seeking radical land reform, had Bolshevik sympathies partly due to Ossetian ties to the party in Vladikavkaz and partially due to the landlord accommodationist policies of the Mensheviks. Insurrections by mostly Ossetian peasants a few months after Georgia declared its independence (March 1918) were brutally repressed by the Peoples Guards, the army of the Tiflis-based Menshevik government (Suny, 1994, 198). Ethnic and ideological divides congealed, with Ossetians identifying more openly with the Soviet Bolsheviks against a central state they saw as an oppressive Georgian ethnocracy aligned to foreign powers (briefly Germany and subsequently Great Britain) (Birch, 1996). In 1920, Ossetians in the Roki area revolted with the support of Bolshevik military forces from Vladikavkaz and proclaimed its integration into Soviet Russia. This revolt was also crushed by the People’s Guards, with a series of Ossetian villages razed as punishment. The memory of this brutal repression left a legacy of distrust of direct rule from Tiflis/Tbilisi, something the autonomous oblast status ameliorated though it fell short of the goal of a united transcaucasian Ossetia-Alania district advocated by leading Ossetians at the time.

3 The designation South Ossetia is not used by Georgian nationalists. To stress what they see as their ‘original ownership’ they refer to the region as ‘Samachablo’ or ‘Shida Kartli’ (lands of the Georgian Kartli nobles) or the ‘Tskhinvali region’ after its largest city. ‘Tskhinvali’ is the most common transliteration in English and is adopted here over the less common Russian language transliterations Tskhinval. Contemporary South Ossetia is a composition of some historically distinct areas. The northern part was called Dwaleti Tualt and was inhabited by people speaking Ossetian since the fourteenth century. There is considerable debate about ethno-linguistic character of the autochthons Twal tribes in the area before this. From the sixteenth century onwards the Twals as well as other Ossetian settlers moved into the foothill areas and colonized the territory that makes up the rest of contemporary South Ossetia. During this period these groups fought against Georgian feudal lords, more successfully in the mountains than in the foothills where Ossetian farmers became Georgian serfs until the mid nineteenth century. The Georgian state aligned with the Russian empire in 1801 and was gradually reduced to a province within it. South Ossetia emerged as a distinct administrative area from the 1820s to the end of the 1850s after which it was incorporated into the Gori district (uyezd) of the Tiflis governate (gubernia).
As a distinctive oblast, South Ossetia did not become an Ossetian bastion. Russian and Georgians were the languages of administration while ethnic Georgians and Ossetians, using both languages freely, enjoyed mostly positive relations under the Soviet Union. Strains did exist over linguistic script and education, with a policy from 1938 to 1953 of using Georgian script for Ossetian creating a resented split from the Cyrillic based Ossetian taught in North Ossetia. Intermarriage was common and while many Ossetians living in Georgia became culturally Georgian as a means of social mobility, some choose to retain a distinct non-Georgian identity and retained strong bonds with their ethnic kin in North Ossetia. Many had family members who moved to Prigorodnyy as part of the Stalinist urged in 1944-47 and subsequently in the 1950s (see accompanying article by O’Loughlin, Toul and Kolossov). Seasonal migration for work also left the region embedded within broader networks.

The crisis and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union changed things radically. According to the 1989 census the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia has a population of 5.4 million, 70% of whom were ethnic Georgian, with the largest minority groups being Armenians (8%), Russians (6.3%), Azeris (1.8%), Ossetians (3%) and Abkhaz (1.8%). The South Ossetian oblast in 1989 had a population slightly less than 100,000, of whom 66% (65,232) were Ossetian and 29% Georgian (28,544) (see Table 1). More Ossetians lived beyond South Ossetia in Georgia proper than in South Ossetia, 97,658 to be precise in urban centers like Tbilisi and elsewhere across the country including Akhkhazia. As Soviet authority and legitimacy collapsed in Georgia in the wake of the bloody repression of April 9, 1989, radical nationalist militias like the Mkhedrioni filled the power vacuum. The result was a period of was anarchy and violence against ethnic minorities that left Georgian Ossetians fleeing for their lives to South and North Ossetia and others elsewhere (Wheatley, 2005). Increasingly radical ethnocratic policies in Tbilisi brought forth counter-mobilization by Akhkhazia and South Ossetia. The populat front organization that emerged in South Ossetia was Ademon Nykhaz (People’s Word/Parliament), a network of Ossetian nationalists with strong ties to North Ossetia. Ethnic entrepreneurs used the rising tensions to further their bids for power generating polarization and fear within multi-ethnic and inter-ethnic settlements. The process in South Ossetia began with an attempt by the South Ossetian Regional Soviet to upgrade the status of the AO within Georgia. On 10 November 1989, it approved a decision to transform the AO into the South Ossetian ASSR, which would form part of Georgia but could potentially secede. The Georgian parliament revoked the South Ossetian parliament’s decision the next day. In a tactic similar to that used by Slobodan Milošević ‘anti-bureaucratic revolution’ in Yugoslavia, two Georgian nationalists, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Givi Gumbaridze, organized a cavalcade of protestors to go to Tskhinvali to demonstrate against the regional parliament’s action as well as recent passage of an Ossetian language law (Zürcher, 2007, 124). The group’s progress was blocked by counter-demonstrators at the outskirts of Tskhinvali, with clashes producing the first casualties. From this time onwards, the ‘territorial integrity’ of Georgia has been in question and the region partially under siege.

In August 1990, the Georgian Supreme Soviet banned the participation of regional parties in forthcoming elections, a move aimed against Ademon Nykhaz. The decision only deepened polarization. On the 20 September the local Soviet proclaimed its full sovereignty within the USSR, an act countermanded the next day by the Georgian parliament. October saw Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table coalition win a majority in the Georgian parliamentary elections, which were not held in South Ossetia. It held its own elections on 9 December 1990 which the Gamskhurdia government refused to recognize. On 11 December, his government abolished all autonomy enjoyed by South Ossetia and prepared to seize the territory. In January 1991 Tskhinvali was attacked and looted by a new (and criminally run) Georgian ‘National Guard’ militia. Units ransacked the Ossetian national theatre and decapitated the plaster statue of Ossetia’s national poet, Kosta Khetagurov. Monuments to Ossetian soldiers who fought in the Red Army during World War II were destroyed (Dobbs, 1991). The militia retreated after three weeks but as Georgia prepared to vote on a referendum on independence in March 1991, Gamsakhurdia ordered them to seize Tskhinvali. They were met by fierce resistance from South Ossetian militias and were eventually driven back after intensive clashes. A second invasion was attempted in September 1991 and a third in June 1992 which succeeded only in destroying the great majority of dwellings in the city. By this time Gamsakhurdia had been overthrown and his successor Eduard Shevardnadze signed a conflict resolution agreement with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Sochi on 24 June 1992 which established protocols for managing the peace and a negotiating mechanism for resolving the conflict. The fighting left over a thousand dead (International Crisis Group, 2004, 4). Many horrific war crimes on both sides were perpetrated (Human Rights Watch, 1992). Thousands were displaced from their homes, many of which were looted and damaged beyond repair.:

4 The text of the referendum stated: “Do you agree that the state independence of Georgia should be restored on the basis of the independence act of May 26, 1918?”. The Soviet Georgian parliament proclaimed independence on the 9th April 1991.

5 It is estimated that between 40,000 and 100,000 Ossetians were displaced from Georgia proper and South Ossetia to North Ossetia. Approximately 10,000 of the 28,544 Georgians in South Ossetia in 1989 were displaced into Georgia proper. See Table 1: Population and Displacement Estimates.
1989-1992 Georgian-Ossetian Conflict

The Sochi Agreement, and its subsequent elaboration, institutionalized a post-Soviet South Ossetia with a peculiar geopolitical character. Firstly, it established a Joint Control Commission (JCC) made up of Georgian, Russian, North and South Ossetian representatives plus participation from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to supervise observance of the agreement and craft conflict resolution measures as needed. Second, it established Joint Peacekeeping Forces, made up of Georgian, Russian and Ossetian units. These operated under a mandate from the JCC and the accumulation of agreements it developed. The most significant of these was a 1999 agreement elaborating a ‘zone of conflict’ which was a circle of 15 kilometer radius measured from the center of Tskhinvali. It also established a ‘security corridor’ which designed an area inside the old oblast and beyond it in Georgia proper where peacekeepers could establish check points (see Figure). The security corridor traversed the administrative border and was not divided into separate distinct spaces or areas of control. Russian peacekeeping forces, therefore, could legally establish checkpoints within Georgian (proper) territory provided it they were within the agreed security corridor (though, in practice, they tended not to cross into Georgia) (Schwitz and Barry, 2008). With a geographically circumscribed mandate, small numbers, local composition and limited international dimension, these forces were never equivalent to United Nations ‘peacekeepers’ in other conflict zones, like IFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Sochi Agreement was a light, limited and imperfect instrument for handling the South Ossetian conflict. There were no procedures for investigating the war crimes and pillage that occurred, granting not only impunity for perpetrators but implicit license for future activities beyond the law. Displaced person return aspirations were only gestural. Little progress was made in JCC talks on status; the conflict became a ‘frozen’ one, a quasi-state status quo that was favorable for criminal
enterprise and contraband commerce. Smuggling through the Roki Tunnel became a lucrative business, for traffickers as well as some of the Russian authorities extracting transit fees.

Nevertheless, the period from 1993 to 2001 produced a relatively stable peace on the ground. Ethnic tension subsided and there was little to no ethnicized violence within the zone of conflict. The Shevardnadze government adopted a tolerant attitude towards the enclaves and the polarization of the Gamsakurdia years was avoided. The Russian Federation provided supplies to the South Ossetian authorities. An oil pipeline ran from Russia through the Roki tunnel to supply Tskhinvali and Ossetian villages (and also ethnically Georgian villages too); a drinkable water supply pipeline ran from the Edisi in the north to Tskhinvali, rehabilitated in recent years by European Union funds. Local elections saw Lyudvig Chibirov, an Ossetian professor, come to power first as chairman of the parliament and then in 2006 as the first “president of South Ossetia.” In late 2001, he was defeated by Eduard Kokoity, a former Soviet wrestler, in a local election. Kokoity having secured influential backing locally and in Moscow.

Kokoity’s rule and most especially the election of the Saakashvili government on a platform of radical reform created conditions for renewed polarization. Saakashvili established a Ministry for Reunification and portrayed the problem as one that would be solved quickly through bold action and the economic pull of a prosperous Georgia. His government achieved initial success with the ousting of the ‘heroic sultanism’ of Aslan Abashidze in Adjaria, a former Ottoman region and later Soviet autonomous republic in southwest Georgia (Derluguian, 2005). At the same time (May 2004), the Saakashvili government launched an ‘anti-smuggling’ campaign in South Ossetia. The policy was part of a broader effort at state strengthening and national integration. Because it had no formalized border checkpoints, Georgia lost considerable revenue from untaxed goods entering Georgian from Russia through the Ergeneti market, a meeting place of traders from all sides southeast of Tskhinvali in Georgian proper. The new government calculated that it could criminalize the South Ossetian leadership without alienating ordinary Ossetians. But implementation only hardened ethnic borders. Roads previously open from 1993 to 2004 were closed in spot checks by Georgian police. The concerted attempt to shut down the area’s contraband commerce over the summer eventually erupted in violence in August 2004 in which dozens were killed. Since then the main road north of Tskhinvali towards Java and onwards towards the Roki tunnel has been blocked by the ethnically Georgian villages that straddle it (the Kekhvi-Tamarasheni internal enclave). The Saakashvili government refurbished an old access road which connected Eredvi to Tamarasheni to supply these villages. Interference by these villages with the water pipeline from Edisi to Tskhinvali was another source of tension (Cullison and Osborn, 2008). South Ossetians viewed the blockages as an act of aggression and were forced to renew use of an alternative 36 kilometer northern bypass road which runs from the west of Tskhinvali through a series of Ossetian mountain villages to just south of Java. Known as the Zar road, this was initially only a mountain path but was pressed into service as an escape lifeline by Ossetians fleeing the ethnic violence of the early 1990s. Widened into a dirt road in the mid-1990s, it was pressed into service again as a more extensive gravel road from 2004 onwards. It was only recently asphalted (Morozov, 2008).

Attacking perceived lifelines of the Ossetians only deepened fears and renewed territorial polarization in the region. Kokoity was able to portray the Georgian actions as an attack on Ossetians and not criminality as Saakashvili claimed. After the conflict, an International Crisis Group report concluded that “[t]he greatest lesson from the May-August period is that attempts to resolve the conflict swiftly will lead to war” (International Crisis Group, 2004, ii). The Saakashvili government offered a new peace plan in July 2005 but it was rejected by Kokoity who eventually countered with a plan that would see South Ossetia become independent. In November 2006, his government organized a popular referendum in which 95% of approximately 55,000 registered voters reaffirmed their wish to become independent from Georgia. Political polarization deepened further when in 2007 the government in Tbilisi established a ‘Provisional Administration of South Ossetia’ in the region and appointed a former prime minister of the South Ossetian quasi-state and rival of Kokoity, the ethnic Ossetian Dmitry Sanakoyev, as its head. South Ossetia now had personal rivals as leaders of competing governmental authorities to add to its polarized condition.

Georgia: The Rise of an Impatient Reformer

Georgian politics was transformed by the ‘Rose Revolution’ of November 2003 which successfully ousted Eduard Shevardnadze from power after blatantly fraudulent elections. Two months later the American educated Mikhail Saakashvili was elected President with 96 percent of the vote. His National Movement-Democrats group took 67 per cent of the seats in parliamentary

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6 In May 1992 a local Georgian militia killed 33 on the path, mostly women, children and elderly fleeing the shelling of Tskhinvali. Outrage at this incident triggered the seizure of heavy arms from the Soviet army in Vladikavkaz and their movement south by Ossetian militia. A memorial to the incident was dedicated at the site in 2007.

7 Saakashvili held a Muskie Fellowship which allowed him to attend Columbia Law School. Afterwards, he interned with the International League for Human Rights (ILHR) whose president, Scott Horton, became a mentor. The ILHR web site states the following about Horton: “Mr. Horton has handled some of the largest foreign direct investment in the Caspian region, but his practice also encompasses advisory work for foreign sovereigns (including at various times all five of the Central Asian republics) on legal reform issues, representation of multilateral development banks in secured finance and equity investment projects, and representation of Western natural resource companies in exploration and development projects.”

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Saakashvili promised to re-unify the country and to seek membership for Georgia in the European Union and NATO. One of the first acts of the new government (25 January 2004) was to change the Georgian flag from the 1918-21 era one to a new design (free of ‘socialist’ connotations). To further symbolize the departure from the past and the projection of Georgia into a new geopolitical sphere of aspiration, he ordered the display of the European Union flag next to it. The Defense Ministry began displaying the NATO flag.

Saakashvili pursued a reform agenda with great vigor and considerable energy. In this he received considerable help from Western governments and international development agencies. Georgia received considerable aid to modernize its military and ready itself for possible NATO membership. Saakashvili embraced the American vision, incubated during the Clinton presidency, of establishing oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia that would be beyond Russian control. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline was begun under Shevardnadze, built with international funds from multiple investors for a cost of $2.95 billion, and finally opened in 2006. A smaller pipeline from Baku to the Georgian port of Supsa, and rail connections from Baku to Batumi also brought Central Asian and Caspian Sea oil through Georgia to the West. In total, the three routes moved some 1.2 million barrels of oil a day through the country, a relatively small 1.4% of the global crude supply (Chazan and Faucon, 2008). Nevertheless, these transit infrastructures became heavily interpreted objects in heated geo-strategic discourses about energy resource competition and access to Caspian and Central Asian oil and gas (Holman W. Jenkins, 2008, Klare, 2008).

While American government officials were supportive of Saakashvili’s territorial claims and echoed the Georgian government line that Russia’s peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were not neutral and objective, their public position was that Georgia should be cautious and not use force. Saakashvili’s was upbraided by US Secretary of State Colin Powell for his moves against South Ossetia in 2004. But the US government was split between pragmatists and neconservatives, with Saakashvili temperamentally closer to the latter as they became ascendant after Powell’s departure. Besides defense industry networks (with a vested interest in selling military equipment, supplies and ‘NATO upgrading’ packages) and sympathizers on Capitol Hill, Saakashvili cultivated strong relations with neconservative circles in Washington D.C., hiring the firm Orion Strategies to represent Georgia and holding his only public address at the think-tank home of neoconservatism, the American Enterprise Institute, in his visit to the city in July 2006. Orion Strategies was founded in 2001 by Randy Scheunemann, a leading Republican neocon with strong ties to Senators Bob Dole, Trent Lott and John McCain. Through its influence, many leading American politicians visited the region. In June 2005, Saakashvili managed to secure a US presidential visit by George W. Bush, a leader who he admired for “not being afraid to go against the tide and who has, in a way, this rebel style in order to make things happen” (Saakashvili, 2006). A central avenue in Tbilisi was named in Bush’s honor and he became the first American recipient of a new Georgian state honor, the Order of St George. The following year a delegation of six Republican Senators visited Georgia in August and one of them, Senator McCain, became the second American recipient of the Order of St George. In return for American aid and support for Georgia’s bid for membership in NATO, Saakashvili sent 2,000 Georgian troops to the US war in Iraq, becoming the third largest state contributing troops after the Americans and British.

Saakashvili political style was hard charging and often uncompromising. Impatient for reform and determined to achieve his goals, he often ran roughshod over tradition, bulldozing political foes and friends when he was challenged. Like American neoconservatives, he championed a strong executive and altered Georgia’s political system to augment the power of the president. While this produced a dramatic transformation in the capacities of the Georgian state, this also led to increasing authoritarianism and to growing political and civil resistance to his rule. In the most significant political crisis of his tenure until now, he weathered large street demonstrations against his rule in November 2007. An International Crisis Group report on the drift towards authoritarianism under Saakashvili concluded that “the concentration of power in a small, like-minded elite and unwillingness to countenance criticism have undermined its democratic standing. Cronyism is increasingly evident within the senior level of the administration” (International Crisis Group, 2007, i).

### A Great Power Once More: Putin’s Power Projectionism

There was little love lost between Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister under Gorbachev, and the siloviki that came to enjoy restored power under Vladimir Putin in the Russian Federation. Shevardnadze had initiated talk of Georgia joining NATO but when Saakashvili came to power in a popular revolt many though was orchestrated by the Americans, relations with Georgia reached a new level of hostility. Saakashvili tied to cultivate good relations with Putin but their personal meetings only deepened a general hostility into a personal loathing. Russian-Georgian

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8 The diplomat who dealt most with Georgia for the United States was Matthew J. Bryza, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. He is married to Zeyno Baran, a Turkish American scholar who is the Director of the Center for Eurasian Policy and a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington D.C. Baran’s call for the US government to intervene to support Georgia during the August war was looped extensively on Georgian television during the crisis.
relations went from bad to worse. In 2006, the Russian government imposed an embargo of crucial Georgian exports (especially wine) and blocked transportation links.

Putin’s agenda for the Russian state was clear by this stage: a restoration of its “great power” status through strategic exploitation of its oil and gas wealth (Goldman, 2008). Putin oversaw the drift of Russia towards “managed democracy” or, as the Kremlin’s top ideologist Vladislav Surkov put it, a “sovereign democracy.” After floating the idea of a common alliance against international terrorism, Putin came to see the United States as a global power determined to achieve ‘unipolarity’ in world affairs. Rather than common European security, NATO launched an expansionist program that violated pledges made at the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. In his February 2007 Munich speech, Putin declared that “it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust.” Russia has a right to ask, he continued: “against whom is this expansion intended?” (Putin, 2007). It took little suspicion on the part of Russian national security officials to see the US desire for former Soviet republics, like the Baltic states, Ukraine and Georgia, to be part of NATO as an effort to encircle their country with flexible frontline American bases. In the BTC and the parallel South Caucasus Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline (central to the planned Nabucco gas pipeline from Turkey that would take Caspian Sea gas all the way to Austria), the Putin administration saw an attempt to undermine the bargaining power of Russia in international energy markets. Putin’s policies in response were four fold: cultivate allies (like China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and multi-polarity ranged against American power in world affairs; deter NATO expansion by diplomatic and other means; re-assert Russian strong influence over ‘post-Soviet space’ including the southern Caucasus; and seek to checkmate America’s attempt to deny Russia dominant access to the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

The independence of Kosovo was considered by Moscow as a violation of international law and a clear instance of Western “double standards.” Addressing Kosovo in 2006 Putin declared that “[a]ny proposed solutions should be universal in nature. If someone takes the view that Kosovo should be granted state independence, then why should we withhold the same from Abkhazia or South Ossetia?” Furthermore, “to act fairly, we need commonly recognized, universal principles for resolving these problems” (RTR Russia Television, 30 January 2006 (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2006a)). Local leaders in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria worked to turn the Kosovo impasse to their advantage, building alliances with groups in the Russian parliament sympathetic to a linkage of their status with that of the Balkan breakaway region. Two years later when Kosovo did finally declare its independence, Putin remarked before a CIS summit in Moscow:

The Kosovo precedent is a terrible precedent. Essentially it is blowing up the whole system of international relations which has evolved over the past not even decades but centuries. Undoubtedly, it might provoke a whole chain of unpredictable consequences. Those who are doing this, relying exclusively on force and having their satellites submit to their will, are not calculating the results of what they are doing. Ultimately this is a stick with two ends, and one day the other end of this stick will hit them on their heads (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2008a).

In March Putin’s government lifted sanctions against Abkhazia while the Duma held hearings on recognition of the three pro-Russian quasi-states.

Putin also spoke out against the consideration NATO was giving to membership by Ukraine and Georgia. Speaking to reporters at NATO’s Bucharest statement on 4 April, he called the extension of the alliance to the borders of Russia a “direct threat to the security of our country.” He added that “[t]he claim that this process is not directed against Russia will not suffice. National security is not based on promises. And the statements made prior to the bloc’s previous waves of expansion simply confirm this” (a reference to the promise by the first President Bush not to expand NATO) (Putin, 2008). At the prior private Russian-NATO Council meeting, Putin was reported to have laid out the matter in clear zero-sum terms: “NATO should not ensure its security at the expense of the security of other countries, Russia included. NATO is a military alliance, and as such it should display restraint in the military sphere. If NATO continues approaching the Russian borders, Moscow will take "necessary measures"” (Kosyrev, 2008). A different source cited him saying: “We are watching on while military infrastructure draws nearer and crosses the borders of the former USSR. It is already a few hundred kilometres from St Petersburg.” NATO is still a military alliance and “it should base its relations with Russia on measures of military restraint” (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2008c).

The Russian leader and his successor conveyed this message directly to President Bush when he visited Sochi after the NATO summit. The push to offer Ukraine and Georgia NATO membership, which Bush had personally lead at a NATO heads of state dinner on 3 April, was crossing Russian ‘red lines’ (Cooper, et al., 2008). The US administration believed they could forestall Russian concerns by emphasizing other possibilities for cooperation. The Russian leadership, however, concluded that
their concerns were being ignored and began initiating changes in their relations with Abkhazia and
South Ossetia. The independent Russian defense analyst Pavel Felgenhauer has argued that the
decision to attack Georgia was taken after the NATO summit when it became clear that Georgia
would eventually get NATO membership, even though it was postponed at Bucharest (Felgenhauer,
2008). On 16 April, Putin directed that formal legal relations be established between Russia and the
two separatist enclaves. This ‘recognition’ sparked a diplomatic response from Georgia. A telephone
conversation between Saakashvili and Putin on 21 April quickly degenerated into an exchange of
offensive language (Traub, 2008).

THE CRISIS UNFOLDS

Tensions between Georgia and South Ossetian forces, backed by North Ossetian and the
Russian Federation, had been simmering for a long time. Over the last number of years Russian
aircraft had engaged in a series of provocative over flights of South Ossetian and Georgian proper
airspace. In August 2007 Russian planes allegedly fired a missile at a Georgian village (Guest and
Schmidt, 2007). Tbilisi itself was engaged in its own provocative flights. In April 2008 it claimed a
Russian fighter jet downed an unmanned Georgian reconnaissance aircraft over Abkhazia (Buckley,
2008). The most recent pre-war incident was in July 2008 when four Russian warplanes circled South
Ossetia while U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was visiting Georgia’s capital, Tbilisi. Prior
to the war both sides engaged in military exercises. In July, a two week war game exercise ‘Immediate
Response 2008’ gathered 1,000 US troops with 600 Georgian forces and smaller numbers from
Ukraine, Armenia and Azerbaijan at the Vaziani military base, a former Russian air force base in
Georgia. From 15 July to 4 August ‘Kavkaz 2008’ brought together over 8,000 Russian Federation
troops from across the Caucasus in a large scale ‘counterterrorist’ exercise. Among the exercises was
one of repelling an attempted invasion of Russia by “groups of bandits” through the Roki Tunnel and
across the Mamison mountain pass (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2008b).

The origins of the escalation which lead to all-out war are, as one might expect, in dispute
(Finn, 2008b). On August 1st a Georgian police vehicle was destroyed by a land mine, planted
presumably by South Ossetian forces, and six injured. Georgian military forces retaliated with sniper
attacks against South Ossetians, mostly off duty policemen out fishing or swimming, reportedly
killing six (Champion and Osborn, 2008b, Dzhindzhikhashvili, 2008). The upsurge in deadly violence
precipitated a partial civilian evacuation in buses from Tskhinvali to Vladikavkaz on the 2nd and 3rd.
A cease-fire failed to hold as skirmishes continued. Heavy fighting resumed on the 6th of August
before planned meetings on the 8th. The Georgian government later claimed, on the basis of secret
recordings, that during the early hours of the 7th Russian armored forces started moving through the
Roki tunnel as part of an ‘invasion of Georgia’ and that they moved troops in response to this (the
Russians describe the movements on the 7th as routine support for their peacekeepers). President
Saakashvili also claimed that around 11:00 pm on the 7th 150 Russian tanks invaded Georgia through
the Roki tunnel. That afternoon Marat Kulakhmetov, commander of the Russian peacekeeping
forces, Eduard Kokoyt, president of South Ossetia and Tensur Yakobashvili, the Georgian minister
for re-integration, met to discuss the escalating fighting with Kulakhmetov suggesting that
Yakobashvili telephone Saakashvili to propose a unilateral ceasefire. At 7:30 pm the Georgian
president appeared on television and did indeed announce a unilateral cease-fire. “Please, do not test
the Georgian side’s patience. Let’s stop this spiral of violence” he declared (Olearchyk and Clover,
2008). Soon thereafter, according to the Georgian government, Georgian villages in the Tskhinvali
region came under heavy bombardment from South Ossetian forces, actions portrayed as deliberative
provocations by the Georgian government. OSCE monitors in the region later stated that they had no
evidence that this shelling occurred (Chivers and Barry, 2008). At 9:30 pm Russian peacekeepers
observed columns of Georgian tanks moving towards Tskhinvali from the south. Georgian
peacekeepers serving jointly with their Russian colleagues left their posts at this point (Clover, et al.,
2008). Whether monitors from the OSCE did so is disputed. During a news broadcast that began at 11
pm the head of Georgian peacekeepers in the area, General Mamuka Karashvili, declared that the
Georgian government had decided to “restore constitutional order” in the breakaway region in
response to the South Ossetian bombardment (Metreveli, 2008). The object of the operation was
South Ossetian forces; he made no mention of invading Russian tanks. At the same time, the Russian
peacekeepers held a hasty press conference to publicize the Georgian troop movements (Clover, et al.,
2008).

In a major escalation at 11:35 pm, the advancing Georgian forces south of the Tskhinvali
began shelling the city with truck-based GRAD rockets.10 OSCE monitors in the city counted rounds
exploding at intervals of 15 to 20 seconds (Chivers and Barry, 2008).11 Georgian forces then advanced
past Russian peacekeeper positions – killed by Georgian forces12 -- into the outskirts of Tskhinvali in
the early hours of August 8th. While most attention was focused on the subsequent battle for

10 A month later Amnesty International researchers estimated the number of civilian houses directly hit by shelling
in the initial Georgian bombardment at well over one hundred (Amnesty International, 2008).
11 The former British Army captain who was the senior OSCE representative in Georgia later stated that “the attack
was clearly, in my mind, an indiscriminate attack on the town, as a town” (Chivers and Barry, 2008).
12 Russian television broadcast claims that Georgian troops executed injured Russian peacekeepers based in
Tskhinvali who were captured in the initial attack (Beaumont, et al., 2008)
Tskhinvali, Georgian forces attacked Ossetian villages in all four rayoni in a coordinated operation code named ‘Clear Field.’

The response to the Georgian attack was almost immediate. Russian army vehicles began moving T-72 tanks and troops from the 58th Russian army base in Vladikavkaz into the region. Some tank columns were on their way to the Roki tunnel by 2 am (Clover, et al., 2008). Most were on the move between nine and fifteen hours after the Georgian offensive. The leader of Abkhazia Sergei Bagapsh promised 1,000 volunteers to South Ossetia. ‘Volunteers’ were said to be traveling to the region from North Ossetia. Reacting to developments in Beijing, Prime Minister Putin declared that Georgia’s “aggressive actions” will not go unpunished (Clover and Morris, 2008). North Ossetian President Mamsurov traveled to South Ossetia with a column of buses to evacuate civilians, meeting with Kokoity and promising support.

The war that followed can be divided into five phases. The first was the battle for Tskhinvali and the surrounding mountain villages. Those South Ossetian residents not evacuated hunkered down in cellars while Georgian forces approached. Ossetian mountain villages in the Leningori district were taken over by Georgian troops; Ossetian sources claim that Ossetian villages in Sinaguri, Djalabeti and Java were also attacked. There were many reports of widespread deaths, with estimates ranging from five hundred to two thousand. Russian television broadcast the latter figure, one which was revised downwards later. Russian aircraft – Sukhoi 25s, Tupolev 22 reconnaissance planes and Mi-24 helicopter gunships -- were soon in the air and at daybreak they began engaging the Georgian planes attacking Russian forces with cluster munitions while exiting the Roki tunnel, and Georgian forces in the region of South Ossetia. The Russians suffered initial losses exiting the Roki tunnel and a Russian general in command of the 58th Army was wounded in an ambush by Georgian soldiers. Between two and six Russian aircraft were shot down, one a Tupolev 22. Around noon on the 8th Russian planes attacked the Georgian military base in Gori. There is also evidence that two SS-21 missiles were fired from Russian territory into Georgia, one hitting a police station in Poti (Gordon, 2008). Reporters later found debris from SS-21 and BM-21 rockets, both of which can carry cluster munitions, in Poti, Gori and the village of Variani (Kramer, 2008), Human Rights Watch researchers later found evidence of the use of cluster munitions by both Russian and Georgian forces around four towns and villages in Georgia’s Gori district (Human Rights Watch, 2008a). The Georgian government declared a general mobilization and appealed for international aid. Saakashvili, in a television address, declared that the outskirts of Tskhinvali is “under our control.” But its advancing forces were checked by local Ossetian militias and the arriving Russian military and forced into a retreat towards Gori by the evening of the 8th; the last Georgian forces weren’t forced out until Sunday the 10th (Clover, et al., 2008).

The second phase was the Russian counterattack which began immediately with Russian bombing raids against Georgian military installations and other targets of opportunity. Ballistic missiles were also used. Some bombs missed their targets causing civilian casualties. Two apartment blocks were hit in Gori killing at least seven civilians on the morning of the 9th. Some villages in the vicinity of Tskhinvali were also targeted. On the ground, it took four days for the Russian forces to establish full control over South Ossetia. From the 10th, they extended their lines beyond the internal security corridor within the region to occupy Georgian villages within South Ossetia. The village of Kakhty was among the first occupied. During this time Russian planes continued bombing sorties against Georgian military facilities, airports and the port of Poti. A Russian naval squadron patrolled the waters off Georgia’s Black Sea coast, and sank some Georgian missile boats that engaged them. The extensive nature of the Russian response, targeting facilities and infrastructure far from the zone of hostilities, drew widespread international charges that it was “disproportionate” relative to the initial Georgian offensive.

The third phase was the Russian ground invasion of Georgia proper. In practical terms, this was barely a discrete phrase because its began on the 10th when the Russian forces pushing the Georgian army back to their base of operations in Gori continued their shelling and hot pursuit beyond the administrative lines of the Soviet era South Ossetian AO. The villages of Eredvy and Prisi, about two miles from Tskhinvali, were scenes of shelling (Barnard, et al., 2008). A Western diplomat on the ground indicated that the Russians “seem to have gone beyond the logical stopping point” (the Georgian-South Ossetian border) (Barnard, 2008). That same day about 1,000 Abkhaz troops, supported by Russian fighter planes, pushed into the Georgian occupied end of the Kodori Gorge. The following day Russian forces took over the western city of Senaki and seized a military base there built to NATO standards.

The fourth phase was the ceasefire agreement and final establishment of a cessation of hostilities. President Sarkozy of France, in his capacity as President of the Council of the European Union, flew to Moscow on the 12th and helped negotiate a six point ceasefire agreement with Russian President Medvedev in the Kremlin. The agreement specified that the armed forces of Georgia should withdraw to “their permanent positions” and that the “armed forces of the Russian Federation must withdraw to the line where they were stationed prior to the beginning of hostilities.” In the interim, it allowed that “Russian peacekeeping forces will take additional security measures.” This provision

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13 Satellite images of the extensive destruction of the Ossetian villages of Avnevi and Nuli are available under Georgia at: http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/
became the basis for the establishment of ‘buffer zones’ by the Russian military, acting in a self-designated fashion as ‘peacekeepers,’ outside the two enclaves and inside Georgia proper. The geographical extent of the buffer zones was never clear, and the subject of considerable international suspicion and tension. The South Ossetian buffer zone overlapped with the already established security corridor agreed in 1992 but went beyond it. Russian forces establish at least eight military posts across Georgian territory, with only the addition of an armband signifying their status as ‘peacekeepers.’ The Abkhaz buffer zone extended to the outskirts of Senaki; Russian soldiers also occasionally patrolled in Poti. A letter clarifying that the provision would not apply to populated areas or the main east-west highway was negotiated by international diplomats. The agreement – the six point plan and accompanying clarifying letter – was eventually signed by Saakashvili on 15 August and by Medvedev the following day. Russian forces slowly began pulling back from their maximum positions within Georgia proper. Many returned to the 5th army base in Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia.

The Russian occupation of South Ossetia and parts of Georgia facilitated the looting and pillage of ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia by irregular forces from South Ossetia and from across the North Caucasus who flocked to the conflict as ‘volunteers’ when it began. Human Rights Watch researchers witnessed the destruction and looting of the eight Georgian villages that comprised the Kekhvi-Tamarasheni internal enclave – Kekhvi, Kmetri, Dzartsemi, Kurta, Zemo Achabeti (Verhhnie Achaeveti in Russian), Kheiti, Kvemo Achabeti (Nizhnie Achaveti in Russian), and Tamarasheni -- north of Tskhinvali on the 12th of August (Human Rights Watch, 2008e) (see Map). Satellite images of the region showed active fires in ethnic Georgian villages on August 10, 12, 13, 17, 19 and 22, days after the end of fighting in the area (Human Rights Watch, 2008b).14 Revenge attacks and free lance ethnicized violence later spread to Georgian property in the villages of Eredvi, Berula and Argvitsi to the west of Tskhinvali15 and Ditisi, Tirdznisi and Kuraleti to the southwest in Georgia proper (Tavernise and Siegel, 2008). The villages of Variani, Shindisi and Karaleti in the southern part of enclave and beyond it to Gori all experienced marauders looting homes and stealing property with Akhaldaba, just outside Gori, a partial exception. Local residents were also kidnapped, beaten up and murdered (Chivers, 2008, Tavernise, 2008). Some Georgian villages and local residents were protected by Russian soldiers but clearly not all (Finer, 2008). Returning to open an office in Gori on 25 August, UNHCR officials reported that a ‘new humanitarian crisis’ evolved the next day after the arrival of 365 elderly IDPs from villages in the buffer zone fleeing raids by armed militia. Simultaneously, spontaneous returnees from Tbilisi to buffer zone areas got stuck in Gori due to security situation. In response, the UNHCR began erecting shelter tents on the local football field (UNHCR Georgia, 2008).

The final phase was the slow withdrawal of Russian forces from positions within Georgia proper. False starts and confusion over the buffer zones prompted renewed diplomacy by Sarkozy who negotiated a follow-on agreement with Russia for withdrawal of its forces from areas adjacent to the borders of the enclaves by 10 October, and the deployment of at least two hundred European Union monitors by 1 October. The Russian withdrawal was completed on 8 October 2008 when they removed the last of the checkpoints they had established in the extended buffer zones. European Union monitors began to operate in the area as did Georgian police forces. The Russian forces and their local allies withdrew to the administrative borders of the two enclaves but not beyond that to status qua ante positions. The de jure boundaries of the Soviet AO not the de facto boundaries of post-Soviet South Ossetia seemed to be the new borderline. As of late October, Russian forces have not withdrawn from Akhalgori in South Ossetia and from the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia -- areas administered by Georgia before the August war. It is questionable whether this will happen (Trofinov, 2008). Russian forces did withdraw from the ethnically mixed village of Mosabruni, south of Akhalgori and within the boundaries of Soviet South Ossetia around the 20th of August but returned August 25th to re-establish a checkpoint and evict the Georgian police (Pan and Finer, 2008). Overall the war and its aftermath have advanced the consolidation of Ossetian control over the internal space of South Ossetian. It seems unlikely that the road north from Tskhinvali will ever be subject to the writ of Tbilisi again.

While further details of the war will no doubt emerge two things are clear. The first is that the Saakashvili government allowed itself to become caught within an escalating logic of force in its conflict with South Ossetia, Abkhazia and ultimately Russia. Its proclivity towards force played into their hands (a ‘no use of force’ agreement would have reduced fears and made diplomacy the only possible path forward). Both quasi-states and their Russian backers were generally well prepared for the war that eventually came and reacted relatively swiftly to events. The second is that the Saakashvili government decided to escalate the conflict on the night of August 7th for its own...
Was this an attempt to take advantage of the distraction of the opening of the Olympics? Was it genuinely informed by the assumption that they could take South Ossetia in a quick blitzkrieg – with perhaps Croatia’s 36 hour Operation Storm in August 1995 as an inspiration -- and not suffer a reaction from Russia and Abkhazia? Or was it an attempt to dramatize their circumstance to a sympathetic White House and secure international aid and possibly early membership in NATO? These questions need clarification but preliminary evidence suggests a mixture of hubris and imprecision on the part of the Georgian government triggered the initial offensive.

COMPETING STORYLINES

The practice of geopolitics involves the conduct of statecraft through state actions and the construction of particular meanings around events. This operates through the use of metaphors, analogies and storylines, with leaders performing these storylines before domestic and international audiences. Using established techniques for the analysis of geopolitical storylines, Table 2 outlines the different storylines promoted by the Georgian and Russian governments during the crisis (Ó Tuathail, 2002). Let’s briefly examine how each storyline was performed during the first weeks of the conflict.

Georgian Government

The Georgian government represented its initial attempt to take South Ossetia domestically as the liberation of Georgian territory from separatists who were in the pay of Russia. Addressing the Georgian public on the 8th, Saakashvili stated that “we initiated military operations after separatist rebels in South Ossetia bombed Tamarasheni and other villages under our control. Most of the territory of South Ossetia has been liberated and is now under the control of Georgian law enforcement agencies.” He went on to list a series of villages that have been ‘liberated’ adding that Georgian forces “have surrounded Tskhinvali, most of which has been liberated.” Despite conceding

that Georgia initiated military operations, he represented the Russian response to these actions as “classic international aggression.” The international community should know that “Georgia was not the aggressor, and Georgia will not give up its territories.” Scaling-up the meaning of the crisis to encompass the future of Georgia as a whole, he added: “Georgian will not renounce its freedom and sovereignty” (Saakashvili, 2008b).

Inflating the scale of the crisis from the separatist region to the future of Georgia and beyond to the future of Ukraine, the Baltic states, European capitals, NATO, Euro-Atlantic institutions and “the West” in general is how the Georgian government responded to the subsequent short war. On all occasions, Georgian government officials sought to internationalize the crisis and enframe it within resonant historical analogies, most especially those concerning Nazi Germany and the Cold War. Co-existent with this analogical reasoning was the operation of a series of downscaled primary metaphors: that of the bully and persons who are ‘evil’ (on primary metaphors see (Lakoff, 1996)). In short, the Georgian government sought to project universal affective categories and leave the messy details of the crisis behind. Aided by Orion Strategies in Washington D.C. and Aspect Consulting in Brussels, Saakashvili was able to appear almost daily in the American and European media and place multiple opinion editorials in the top national newspapers. His fluent accent less English was a major asset in allowing him to make his case (by contrast, his voice was dubbed in a shrill Russian on Russian television)(Levy, 2008). Let’s consider a few examples out of the many available.

In an appearance on CNN on 9 August, Saakashvili described the reality of the crisis as the small nation of Georgia being brutally attacked by its big neighbor Russia. Casting Georgia’s actions as a response to provocations by Russian-backed rebels (their identity beyond that is not mentioned) and to an already initiated Russian tank invasion of ‘our sovereign territory,” he analogized the conflict to Cold War history. “This is exactly the kind of invasion they did into Afghanistan in ’79. This is exactly the kind of invasion they did in Czechoslovakia in ’68 and then to Hungary in ’56” (see also (Saakashvili, 2008c). History is repeating itself, with an aggressive Russia using any pretext for a pre-conceived invasion. Conceding that what was happening is beyond his expectations, Saakashvili pitched Georgia as one of the friendliest towards America in the world (Holmes, 2008). The following day Saakashvili cast the crisis in universal terms:

this is not about Georgia anymore. This is about basic values of humanity, of American values that we always, ourselves, believed in. This is all about human rights. This is all about the future of the world order. And I think there are much bigger things that are at stake here than just Georgia (Blitzer, 2008).
This is a theme he amplified in an opinion editorial in the Wall Street Journal on the 11 August: Georgia is fighting for the West, its conflict about the future of freedom in Europe (Saakashvili, 2008d). Alexander Lomaya, secretary of Georgia’s National Security Council put it in dramatic terms casting Georgia as the first domino in a potential Russian takeover of Europe: “If the world is not able to stop Russia here, then Russian tanks and Russian paratroopers can appear in every European capital” (Barnard, 2008). Georgia lost its freedom to Russia, to 70 years of communism and slavery. Prime Minister Putin and other Russian leaders “are a product of that system” and they have destroyed Russian democracy. “These people with their KGB backgrounds and with brutal backgrounds will do...their best to manipulate the truth to be cynical...” (Roberts, 2008b).

Picking up on a strong statement of affinity for Georgia from Republican presidential candidate McCain as well as analogies made by leading US neoconservatives to Hitler and Czechoslovakia in 1938 (Kagan, 2008, Kristol, 2008), Saakashvili warned against the geopolitical imagination that comes with appeasement, the view that Czechoslovakia or Georgia are mere “faraway countries” which are little know. “I heard Senator McCain saying we are all Georgians now. I hope people understand that these are their values at stake. This is freedom in general at stake. This is not some far away remote country in which we know little (sic). I mean Georgia is very very modern, normal country” (Smith, 2008). In Saakashvili’s own mind, Finland was a country that could teach Georgia lessons. “I’ve read all the books about how Finland fought this kind of war in 1939” he stated, occasionally referred to the Karelia region’s experience as comparable to the South Ossetia case (the end state was not acknowledged) (Champion, 2008).

Saakashvili offered a catalogue of motives for the Russian actions in Georgia that resonated with classical geopolitical explanations for imperial behavior: control of resources, infrastructure, intimidation and regime change. Russia’s oil riches and desire to assert economic leverage over Europe had emboldened the Kremlin to attack Georgia: “They need control of energy routes. They need sea ports. They need transportation infrastructure, And primarily, they want to get rid of us” (Barnard, 2008). He told a German newspaper something similar:

[Bush] understands that it’s not really about Georgia but in a certain sense it’s also an aggression against America. The Russians want the whole of Georgia. The Russians need control over energy routes from central Asia and the Caspian Sea. In addition, they want to get rid of us, they want regime change. Every democratic movement in this neighbouring region must be got rid of...(Parfitt, et al., 2008).

The Georgian government charged that the Russians planes had attacked the BTC pipeline at least eight times (ironically already shut down at the time because of a terrorist attack against it by the PKK within Turkey). The Georgian Prime Minister Lado Gurgenidze described this as “a direct attack on the energy security of Europe. Militarily it makes no sense” (Finn, 2008a). The Russian government denied targeting the pipeline and it remained undamaged during the war (though whether it was targeted or not remains in dispute).

“Regime change” was an earlier American contribution to the lexicon of geopolitics and it was the Bush administration who amplified the Georgian government’s charge that this was the ultimate motive of the Russian actions (Abramowitz and Lynch, 2008). The Russian government weakly denied the charge, though there was amply public evidence for their contempt for Saakashvili. This lead to considerable speculation whether Russian troops would march on Tbilisi. Indeed Saakashvili himself spread panic by stating as much on Georgian television on the 12th as Russian tanks pushed beyond Gori onto the main road to Tbilisi. Earlier that day he spoke at a rally of thousands in Tbilisi, appearing with leaders from four former Soviet republics and Poland, who had flown to Georgia in an act of solidarity. In a CNN interview on the 13th Saakashvili suggested “their plan was always to take over the whole of Georgia. Their plan was to establish their own government in Tbilisi. And their plan was to kill our democracy” (Roberts, 2008a). Georgians, he offered, were feeling let down, “feel exactly like Czechs felt, like Czechoslovakia felt in 1938 after Munich, exactly the same [as] Poland felt after…the Soviet and the Germany (sic) invasion…the murder of the country is reported live.” The Bush administration’s initial reactions to the invasion “were too soft. You know, Russians don’t understand that kind of soft language” (Roberts, 2008a).

Speaking the same day to the conservative talk show host Glen Beck, Saakashvili described how Russians were burning Georgian cities, destroying villages, killing people and rampant for food. Georgia was dealing with “twenty first century barbarians.” Pressed by Beck if this portended the return of the ‘evil empire,’ Saakashvili pronounced it an evil with truly global ambitions. “I never thought that this evil would come back again. I never thought the KGB people would again try to run the world. And that’s exactly what’s happening now” (Beck, 2008). Saakashvili stuck with the theme of evil and a few days later told an interviewed that Georgia was “looking into the very eyes of evil” (Foreman, 2008). Asked to respond to a Medvedev statement that it is unlikely Ossetians and Abkhazians would ever live together with Georgia in one state again, Saakashvili analogized Abkhazia to the Sudetenland where a minority group is in charge because the majority has been
expelled. South Ossetia is similar, its separatists being “financed, abated and organized by the Russians” (Blitzer, 2008) (Zakaria, 2008).

Table 1: Competing Georgian and Russian Federation Storylines on the August War.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation Description</th>
<th>Georgian Government Storyline</th>
<th>Russian Government Storyline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invasion Description</td>
<td>Russian invasion. Unprovoked attack on the West, freedom, civilized values, democracy.</td>
<td>Humanitarian action to prevent genocide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Analogies</td>
<td>Invasion of Hungary (1956); Czechoslovakia (1968; 1938), Afghanistan (1979), German attack on Poland (1939), Russian attack on Finland (1939).</td>
<td>Appearance of Hitler by the West, Tskhinvali, a hero city, the Stalingrad of the Caucasus. Like NATO intervention in Kosovo, Sakskosvili as Saddam Hussein.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Analogies</td>
<td>Bobroev invasion and takeover of independent Georgia (1921).</td>
<td>Third Georgian genocidal campaign against Ossetians (after 1921 and 1988-92).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Other Nation</td>
<td>People with KGB backgrounds, return of Soviet system. Twenty first century barbarians.</td>
<td>NATO ally. American stooge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geopolitical Metaphors</td>
<td>(Westernizing) Not a ‘fairyway place’ (Chamberlain) but a modern normal country that loves America.</td>
<td>(Localizing) Area of privileged interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploiting Dissident Information</td>
<td>(that Georgia started it): Big powers lie and use of minorities to serve pre-established aims.</td>
<td>(that Russia is the aggressor): The West uses double standards to judge the behavior of Russia. Their actions are cynical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggerring Event</td>
<td>Russian buildup and tanks moving through Roki Tunnel</td>
<td>Georgian attack on Tskhinvali and murder of Russian peacekeepers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution of Motives</td>
<td>Regime change; reassertion of Soviet/Russian Empire. Desire to extinguish vibrant democracy on the border. “They need control of energy routes. They need sea ports.”</td>
<td>Desperate attempt to get into NATO and acquire Western aid. Distraction from domestic problems. Actions of a bloodthirsty lunatic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Russia

The Russian Federation did not start the August war; Georgia was “the aggressor.” This ‘fact’ is at the center of the Russian storyline on the crisis. The initial response by Russian Federation leaders to the Georgian attack was a legalistic one – the military response was described on Kremlin website as “operations to oblige Georgia to restore peace to South Ossetia” -- but this encompassed a certain desire for punishment. In Beijing, Putin was quoted as saying “We are going to make them pay. We are going to make justice” (Cooper, 2008). Russian President Medvedev’s statement on August 8th ends with a similar declaration: “The perpetrators will receive the punishment they deserve.” Three aspects of this initial statement are important as geopolitical speech acts. First, Medvedev re-proclaimed the right of Russia to maintain a presence on Georgian territory through its lawfully sanctioned peacekeeping mission. To this he added an assertion that went beyond legalism: “Russia has historically been a guarantor for the security of the peoples of the Caucasus, and this remains true today.” Second, Medvedev constitutes the Georgian action as an act of aggression against Russian peacekeepers and the civilian population of South Ossetia. Georgia’s actions are a “gross violation of international law” and its victims are not only Russian soldiers working for peace but ordinary civilians the majority of whom are Russian citizens (namely Russian passport-holders in South Ossetia). Third, Medvedev uses the first two proclamations to construct a justifying imperative for action. As President of the Russian Federation, “it is my duty to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they may be.” These three speech acts – asserting a special role in the region, recognizing Ossetians in the enclaves as Russian citizens and proclaiming a ‘responsibility to protect’ -- underline the initial Russian response. In construction they recall historical American justifications for intervention in Central America and Mexico -- its so-called ‘backyard’ -- though some Russian leaders later claimed that the Georgian attack on Russian peacekeepers and citizens made it an armed attack on the Russian Federation which allowed the right to self-defense. South Ossetia and Abkhazia were really matters of ‘internal security.’

Over night reports on the Georgian destruction of Tskhinvali and the displacements it generated forced an already mooted storyline to the fore: South Ossetia was Russia’s Kosovo. Russian television reports from the region described the desperate situation of Ossetians (and some Georgians) cowering in basements in Tskhinvali and the panic of refugees fleeing the region for hospitals and shelter in North Ossetia. RT1 (and the English language ‘Russia Today’) circulated estimates of 1,500 to 2,000 dead in South Ossetia and over 30,000 refugees fleeing the conflict zone, figures cited frequently by Russian policy makers (Lavrov, 2008a). What was a “gross violation of international

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18 Moscow’s policy of providing people in the enclaves with Russian passports is often portrayed as a Machiavellian scheme by Western commentators but it is worth remembering that many of these people were previously Soviet citizens and were left without passports when it collapsed. They never held Georgian citizenship or Georgian passports; indeed, obtaining a passport in Georgia was a major challenge for regular Georgians because of dysfunctionality and corruption until Saakashvili’s reforms.

19 Some Western media critics allowed Russia a backyard even if their geography was not particularly precise. Richard Cohen wrote that, in a way, “the Caucasus is Russia’s Latin America – a sphere of influence asserted by its own version of the Monroe Doctrine” (Cohen, 2008).

20 These initial casualty estimates became part of the information war. Human Rights Watch (HRW) expressed initial skepticism because it was unclear how such figures were compiled, and because the range was inconsistent with the number of wounded civilians and militaries registered at the Tskhinvali hospital. They had interviewed a doctor at the Tskhinvali hospital who said that the hospital received 44 bodies between August 6 and 11. The same doctor reported 273 wounded were treated in the hospital (Human Rights Watch, 2008c). In a Washington Post opinion piece President Saakashvili used the HRW figure of 44 deaths to charge that Russian intervention was launched on the basis of a deliberate lie (Saakashvili, 2008a). HRW protested to Saakashvili about his misuse of

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law” on the 8th, requiring a Russian response under Article 51 of the UN Charter in self-defense (since Russian peacekeepers and Russian citizens were attacked), was promoted on the 10th to a claim that Georgian forces were perpetrating ‘genocide’ against Ossetians. Visiting Vladikavkaz and meeting with Ossetians fleeing the region prompted Putin to promote the term – used often to describe the 1988-92 period – as the most appropriate situation description of Georgian actions. That the Georgian military operation was code named ‘Clear Field’ suggested genocidal intent; Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov later commented that the name “clearly smells of genocide” (Lavrov, 2008c). Meeting thereafter with Medvedev, he reported on how the Georgian actions went “far beyond the normal limits of military operations. It seems to me that we are seeing elements of a kind of genocide against the Ossetian people” (Medvedev, 2008b). Putin’s rhetoric on his visit to Vladikavkaz sowed the seeds for what came later. Because of its actions Georgia had imperiled its legal claim to South Ossetia:

The actions of the Georgian leadership in South Ossetia are a crime and, for most, they are a crime against its own people. A deadly blow has been delivered to the territorial integrity of Georgia and that means massive damage to its national identity. It is hard to imagine how, after all that happened and all that is still happening, they will be able to convince South Ossetia to belong to Georgia. The aggression has let to numerous civilian casualties and has created a humanitarian disaster and that is a crime against the Ossetian people (Russia Today, 2008).

Like Western leaders during the Kosovo crisis, Putin distinguished between the Georgian people and the criminal actions of their leadership. And like the Kosovo case, Russia invoked a ‘responsibility to protect’ a people who were suffering ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘genocide.’ These criminal acts justified the possible revocation of Georgian sovereignty, an option that became an actuality when the Russian Federation eventually recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the 26 August. Medvedev followed Putin’s script immediately. Meeting with an official he charged with gathering evidence of war crimes for the subsequent prosecution of Georgia, he stated that “[t]here is no other name but that of genocide to describe the forms the Georgian forces action has taken because these actions have become mass-scale in nature and have been directed against specific people” (Medvedev, 2008a). In a news conference the same day, Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov of Russia said Georgian attacks on “Russian citizens” in South Ossetia “amounted to ethnic cleansing.” This frame was circulated widely in the Russian media and was substantiated by lurid descriptions of “Georgian atrocities” against Ossetians in Tskhinvali basements and captured villages by refugees and displaced persons. Operation Clear Field was an attempt to wipe Ossetians “from the face of the earth,” a metaphor that Putin reiterated in his sometimes angry responses to how certain Western states represented the crisis (Champion and Osborn, 2008a). In his meeting with Sarkozy, Putin vented his ire suggesting Saakashvili be hanged like Saddam Hussein. A Sarkozy aide later claimed the French President talked Putin out of pursuing regime change like Bush in Iraq (Hall and Peel, 2008). In contrast to Putin’s crude rhetoric of retribution, Medvedev’s press conference on the ceasefire with Sarkozy was full of the rhetoric of humanitarian intervention and international law. No sovereign state has the right to do whatever it pleases. “Faced with the killing of several thousand citizens” the Russian state had to take the appropriate action. Georgian forces were perpetrators of “ethnic cleansing.” “Under international law these acts are deemed a crime, just as the murder of thousands of citizens is called “genocide.” There can be no other name for these acts” (Medvedev, 2008g).

The Russian government, then, justified its actions by extensive reference to UN ‘responsibility to protect’ norms crystallized by the Balkan crises of the nineties even though it opposed NATO’s evoking these norms at the time (Thakur, 2005). Russian officials went further, arguing that its military response was more virtuous than NATO’s 1999 Kosovo intervention which, Foreign Minister Lavrov explained in a Wall Street Journal opinion piece, “degenerated into attacks on bridges, TV towers, passenger trains and other civilian sites, even hitting an embassy.” Russia used force “in full conformity with international law, its right to self-defense, and its obligations under the agreements with regard to this particular conflict.” Lavrov cited the most infamous failure of UN peacekeeping and paradigmatic example motivating ‘responsibility to protect’ thinking. “Russia could not allow its peacekeepers to watch acts of genocide committed in front of their eyes, as happened in the Bosnian city of Srebrenica in 1995” (Lavrov, 2008b). Dmytriy Rogozin made a similar case in the International Herald Tribune about the need to respond to Saakashvili’s order to

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22 Dmitry Rogozin, Russian ambassador to NATO, said that Georgian troops “shot their brother Russian peacekeepers, then they finished them off with bayonets” (Traynor, 2008b)
23 Criticizing Western “cynicism” Putin declared: “They had to hang Saddam Hussein for destroying several Shia villages. But the current Georgian rulers who in one hour simply wiped 10 Ossetian villages from the face of the earth, the Georgian rulers which used tanks to run over children and the elderly, who threw civilians into cellars and burnt them - they are players that have to be protected” (Traynor, 2008a). Some of Putin’s harshest language was reserved for Georgia’s former Soviet republic and Warsaw Pact allies in the region, the leaders of Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states who, as already noted, appeared jointly with Saakashvili on the 12th as Russian tanks loomed before Tbilisi (Barnard, et al., 2008).

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“wipe Tskhinvali…from the face of the earth.” His credibility making such an argument is undermined by the fact that Rogozin was a supporter of Serbian nationalism at the time and was even photographed in Sarajevo a few months after Srebrenica with Ratko Mladić, the Bosnian Serb indicted war criminal charged with directing the Srebrenica massacre (Rogozin, 2008).23

Rogozin also articulated the flexible notion of inside and outside operating in Russian geopolitical reasoning. Because of the attack on Russian peacekeepers operating legally on Georgian territory, the Georgian aggression in South Ossetia “should be classified as an armed attack on the Russian Federation giving grounds to fill the right to self-defense – the right of every state according to Article 51 of the UN Charter.” Also, use of force to defend Russian citizens outside national borders “is traditionally regarded as a form of self-defense” (Rogozin, 2008) (emphasis added).

As might he expected, Russian leaders also cited older precedents and analogies from Russian geopolitical culture (which included the same cites used by neconservatives in Georgian and the United States). Russia, President Medvedev explained, was enforcing peace in accordance with the United Nations Charter because one of the lessons of the 1938 Munich Agreement was that one cannot appease aggressors (Medvedev, 2008f). Saakashvili was portrayed as Hitler in some speech acts and as Saddam Hussein in others but most commonly framed in the base archetype shared by both, a madman and blood thirsty lunatic.24 The memory of the Great Patriotic War were evoked by a remarkable spectacle organized in Tskhinvali on the evening of 21 August. The internationally renowned conductor Valery Gergiev, an ethnic Ossetian born in Moscow and raised in Vladikavkaz, led a classical musical performance by the Maryinsky Orchestra of St Petersburg on the steps of the bombed out parliament building. Condemning the Georgian aggression and conveying his thanks as an Ossetian for the Russian army’s response, he described Tskhinvali as a ‘hero city’ that reminded him of pictures of Stalingrad. The last piece played by the orchestra was Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony, a mournful hymn to the suffering of Leningrad at the hands of the besieging Nazis.

Broadcast live on Russian television, the concert was a high brow cultivation of patriotic affect and a clear incorporation of Tskhinvali’s recent experience into a catalogue of Russian suffering and triumphs through adversity (Kennicott, 2008).

The Kosovo parallel returned when President Medvedev recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states on the 26th of August. The President took the time to explain his decision to international media and cited humanitarian concerns as central to his decision: “the choice was not easy to make, but it represents the only possibility to save human lives” (Medvedev, 2008h) (Medvedev, 2008i). Interviewed on CNN, he cited the legal justification used by the United States and its allies to recognize the independence of Kosovo, namely that it was a unique case. Though Russia rejected this claim, he appealed to the same legal principle in discourse that revealed a mimetic geopolitics at work: “Our colleagues said more than once that Kosovo was a casus sui generis, a special case. But in that case, we can also say that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are also sui generis.”

Asked whether there was not a ‘double standard’ at work in not recognizing Kosovo but recognizing the two breakaway regions, he pronounced the two cases different. The Georgian situation, he explained, “existed for 17 years, during which ethnic cleansing was conducted and cases of genocide took place, both in the early 90s and now it has happened again” (Medvedev, 2008d). Yet they were similar because Russia’s main mission, he explained to the BBC, “was to prevent a humanitarian disaster and save the lives of people for whom we are responsible…We had no choice but to take the decision to recognize these two subjects of international law as independent states. We have taken the same course of action as other countries took with regard to Kosovo and a number of similar problems” (Medvedev, 2008e). In an interview with the Kremlin sponsored English language channel Russia Today he explained the recognition as “designed to prevent genocide, the extermination of peoples, and to help them get back on their feet again” (Medvedev, 2009e).

CONCLUSION

One of the fallacies of globalization is that geography does not matter like it once did. Space-shrinking computer and communications technologies supposedly imply a borderless world, the ‘death of distance,’ a ‘flat earth.’ Amongst fast lane cosmopolitans, such visions can induce dangerous geopolitical fantasies. This is arguably the case with the Saakashvili government which projected the notion that Georgia could detach itself from its geopolitical context and relocate to a Euro-Atlantic modernity by becoming a member of the European Union and NATO. The display of EU and NATO flags next to the new Georgian flag expressed this fantasy. But states can never abjure their geo-historic situatedness. Both sides of the Caucasus are bound together by shared physical geographies and histories, the region’s peoples entwined and conditioned by imperial power and the necessities required of small peoples maneuvering between and within empires. Georgian elites have historically looked towards Russia for protection from the south and have traded sovereignty for it. Russian and Georgian history has been closely entwined since, more so than Russia and the Baltic states who, independent until 1940, are the only post-Soviet states so far to join NATO. Georgia is not doomed by an unlucky geographical location – a Caucasian Mexico “so close to Russia, so far from God” to

23 The Mladic photograph can be seen on his personal web page: http://www.rogozin.ru/
24 Announcing the ceasefire agreement on the 12th Medvedev is translated on the official Kremlin web site as saying “there are some people who, unlike normal people, once they’ve smelt blood it is very hard to stop them.”

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paraphrase Portfolio Diaz -- but certain aspects of its geopolitical situation seem ineluctable. Any independent Georgian state must have good relations with the Russian Federation, no matter how difficult that may be, to secure its future prosperity. Furthermore, it must cultivate good relations with all the peoples of Georgia and guard against becoming an ethnocratic state in theory and practice. Both principles seem necessary requirements for Georgia to flourish.

It was probably inevitable, therefore, that any effort by a genuinely independent Georgia to move beyond deference towards Russia was going to cause problems. Unfortunately, its leadership has pushed matters by seeking to transform the country into a loyal Western client state in the Caucasus. A convergence of American neoservatism and revolutionary reformism propelled Georgia on a polarizing path towards NATO membership when other options, like neutrality or non-alignment, were more prudent adaptations to Georgia’s geopolitical context. Saakashvili’s uncritical embrace of Euro-Atlantic institutions has been sustained by irresponsible promises from the Bush administration of eventual NATO membership and access to significant amounts of credit and aid from Western governments and international institutions. Modern communications (like daily phone calls during a crisis) and strong personal ties have further enabled Saakashvili to feel that Georgia had greater geopolitical proximity to the United States than the Russian Federation. Finally, Georgian military support for the Iraq war and US troop training exercises in Georgia probably cemented the belief that there was emergent special relationship between the states.

The result helped create the folly of the August war, a conflict that had structural aspects but was fatally propelled forward by personal friendships and antagonisms. Temperament matters in international affairs: geopolitics also involves egopolitics. Saakashvili’s personal bond of friendship with George W. Bush and John McCain was enabled by a shared (and self-constructed heroic) ‘rebel style,’ or what others might frame more negatively as recklessness. Saakashvili’s disastrous personal relationship with Vladimir Putin was just as consequential for Georgia. There is considerable evidence which indicates that Putin, and his chosen President, saw the war in overly personalized terms, and that uncontainable anger gave the war a punitive character that it did not need to have for the restoration of a status quo ante (Myers and Shanker, 2008).

The swirl of Cold War and appeasement analogies scripting the crisis in the West has obscured important localized geopolitical aspects of the conflict. Ossetian aspirations for a unified Ossetia-Alania, and Abkhazia distinctiveness, need to be recognized as factors on their own terms. Nor should

27 As of October 2008 the UNHCR was planning temporary accommodation for 23,000 internally displaced persons who have prospects of returning to their homes in the spring, and durable housing for 31,000 that have no prospect of return in the foreseeable future. This ‘new’ displaced population joins an already established caseload of 220,000 displaced persons from the upheavals of the early nineties (UNHCR Georgia, 2008).

28 On cases of counterfeit currency operations and nuclear smuggling in South Ossetia see (Bronner, 2008).
dynamics are quite different. The Georgian attack on Tskhinvali was of a smaller than the Serbian
attack on Kosovo. The case of South Ossetia is quite different. Antonenko, Oksana, "From Kosovo to South Ossetia: In Search of a Precedent." RIA Novosti, 19 August 2008.


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