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# Russia's Kosovo: A Critical Geopolitics of the August 2008 War over South Ossetia

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**Abstract:** A noted political geographer presents an analysis of the August 2008 South Ossetian war. He analyzes the conflict from a critical geopolitical perspective sensitive to the importance of localized context and agency in world affairs and to the limitations of state-centric logics in capturing the connectivities, flows, and attachments that transcend state borders and characterize specific locations. The paper traces the historical antecedents to the August 2008 conflict and identifies major factors that led to it, including legacies of past violence, the Georgian president's aggressive style of leadership, and renewed Russian "great power" aspirations under Putin. The Kosovo case created normative precedents available for opportunistic localization. The author then focuses on the events of August 2008 and the competing storylines promoted by the Georgian and Russian governments. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: H10, I31, O18, P30. 7 figures, 2 tables, 137 references. Key words: South Ossetia, Georgia, Russia, North Ossetia, Abkhazia, genocide, ethnic cleansing, Kosovo, Tskhinvali, Saakashvili, Putin, Medvedev, Vladikavkaz, oil and gas pipelines, refugees, internally displaced persons, Kosovo precedent.

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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 200,000 people displaced from their homes (UNHCR, 2008b). The conflict was initially over South Ossetia but spread to incorporate Abkhazia as well (Fig. 1). 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 (Kolstø, 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 proper<sup>2</sup> before finally withdrawing in October 2008. On August 26, the Russian government recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states (e.g., Levy, 2008b), the first member of the international community to do so and since joined only by Nicaragua.

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<sup>2</sup>It is conventional to use the term "Georgia proper" to refer to Georgian territory beyond the disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

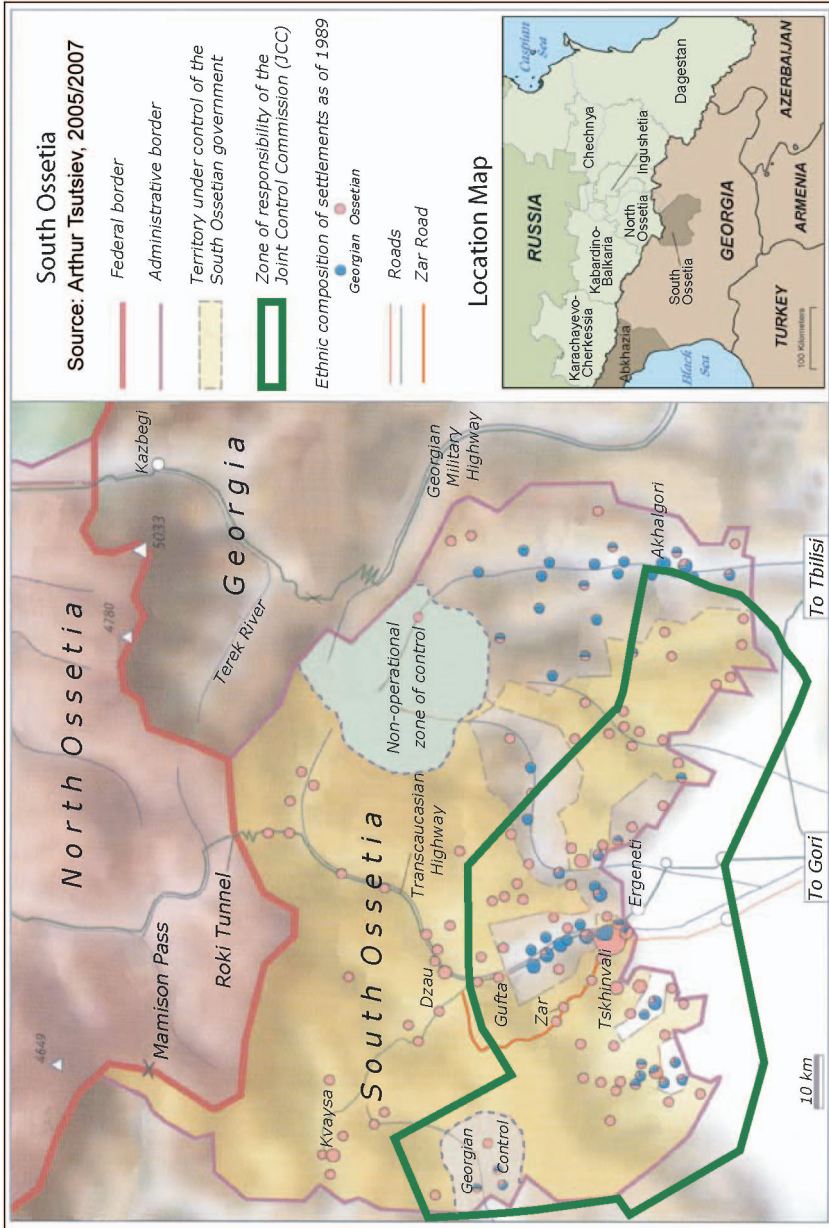


Fig. 1. Map of South Ossetia. Source: Tsutsiev (2005, 2007).

The war produced a crisis in relations between the Russian Federation and Euro-Atlantic institutions, with many politicians and commentators resorting to Cold War analogies and comparisons. But it also caused division within the European Union and NATO, with some state officials taking a more critical view of 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 "reawakened bear," the "return of the cold war," and the "new age of authoritarianism" (Freeland, 2008).<sup>3</sup> The South Ossetian war, however, was more an acceleration of already existing tensions in Russian Euro-Atlantic relations than a rupture. Relations had deteriorated as a result of many events over the previous decade: the Kosovo war (March–April 1999), the abdication of the ABM Treaty by the United States (December 2001), the Yukos affair (October 2003–December 2005), Gazprom's brinksmanship 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 planned U.S. anti-ballistic missile deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic. For many military analysts, Russian President Vladimir Putin's February 2007 speech in Munich condemning "unipolarity" was a noteworthy re-assertionist moment that launched a year in which Russia "flexed its muscle," a trope symbolized literally by widely distributed pictures of a bare-chested Putin fishing and figuratively 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 for the post-Soviet period. 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, the new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev spoke of the Caucasus as a "region of privileged interest" for the Russian Federation (Cheney, 2008, Clover, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

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 in a number of ways (Ó Tuathail, 2006). First, it employs a much broader notion of the geographic in geopolitics which, in classic geopolitical discourse, is often trapped in state-centrism, 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 that 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, exocitizing, 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

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<sup>3</sup>Many media commentators and some newspapers were critical of the Cold War analogy (e.g., see Almond, 2008; De Waal, 2008; King, 2008; Prisoner, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>See also Miliband (2008).

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 juncture of a series of legacies and tendencies at the local, state, regional, and international levels. While the crisis has a long history, the key legacy is that from the breakup of the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

#### South Ossetia: Legacies of Violence

South Ossetia<sup>6</sup> was recognized as a separate ethnoterritorial region by the Soviet Georgian republic in April 1922, a lesser status—autonomous oblast (AO)—than Abkhazia and Adjara, which were to become autonomous socialist Soviet republics (ASSRs) within Georgia.<sup>7</sup> It gained this status due to its distinctive ethnic composition and history as a region opposing the centralizing tendency of the Georgian state (Suny, 1994). On the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, Tualläg Ossetians were a majority in many but not all of the region's villages and had close ties to their ethnic (Ironi) 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 People's Guards, the army of the Tiflis-based Menshevik government (Suny, 1994, p. 198). Ethnic and ideological/class divides congealed, with Ossetians identifying more openly with the Soviet Bolsheviks against a central state they saw as an oppressive Georgian ethnocracy aligned with 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

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<sup>5</sup>For background pertinent to the North and South Caucasus regions, more generally, see O'Loughlin et al. (2007).

<sup>6</sup>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 transliteration "Tskhinval." Contemporary South Ossetia is a composition of some historically distinct areas. The high mountainous northern part was called Dwaleti/Tualta and was inhabited by people speaking Ossetian since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. There is considerable debate about the ethno-linguistic character of the autochthonous Twal tribes in the area before this. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, the Twals (or Tuallägs; see Wixman, 1988, pp. 195–196) 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-19<sup>th</sup> 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 gubernate (*guberniya*; e.g., see Birch, 1996, pp. 151–155).

<sup>7</sup>Abkhazia only in 1931, after losing its status as a *dogovornaya* (treaty) autonomous Soviet republic.

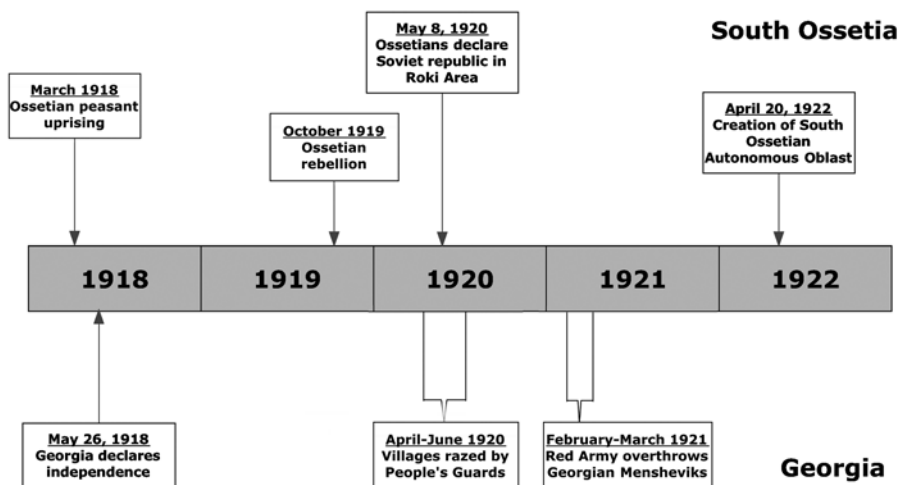


Fig. 2. Timeline of events, 1918–1922.

repression left a legacy of distrust of direct rule from Tiflis/Tbilisi, something the autonomous oblast status ameliorated although falling short of the goal of a united Transcaucasian Ossetia–Alania district advocated by leading Ossetians at the time (see Fig. 2).

As an autonomous oblast, South Ossetia did not become an Ossetian bastion. Russian and Georgian 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 *orgnabor* in 1944–1947 and subsequently in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> Seasonal migration for work also left the region embedded within broader networks.

The crisis and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union changed the situation radically. According to the 1989 census, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia had a population of 5.4 million, 70 percent of whom were ethnic Georgian, with the largest minority groups being Armenians (8 percent), Russians (6.5), Azeris (1.8), Ossetians (3) and Abkhaz (1.8 percent). The South Ossetian oblast in 1989 had a population slightly less than 100,000, of whom 66 percent (65,232) were Ossetian and 29 percent 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 Abkhazia. As Soviet authority and legitimacy collapsed in Georgia in the wake of the bloody repression of April 9, 1989,<sup>9</sup> radical nationalist militias like the Mkhedrioni filled the power

<sup>8</sup>See the accompanying article in this issue by O’Loughlin et al. (2008)

<sup>9</sup>Georgian nationalist demonstrators demanding greater autonomy from Moscow clashed with Soviet troops in Tbilisi’s central square, leaving 19 demonstrators dead and mobilizing support for the country’s pro-independence movement (e.g., Wheatley, 2005).

**Table 1.** Population and Displacement Estimates

Estimate or enumeration	Description	Number
<b>Ossetians</b>		
1989 census	Ossetians in South Ossetian AO	65,232
1989 census	Ossetians in Abkhaz Autonomous Republic	1,165
1989 census	Ossetians in Georgia proper	97,658
1989 census	Total Ossetians in Georgia	164,055
2002 estimate	Ossetians internally displaced within South Ossetia	2,918
2002 estimate	South Ossetians refugees officially registered in North Ossetia	8,538
2002 estimate	Georgian Ossetians displaced (mostly in North Ossetia)	59,658
2002 estimate	Displaced Ossetians from Georgia proper living in South Ossetia	5,000
2002 estimate	Ossetians remaining in Georgia proper	38,028
2004 estimate	Ossetians, Georgians, and others living in quasi-state South Ossetia	65,000
2004 estimate	Ossetians and others with Russian citizenship (percent)	90
<b>Georgians</b>		
1989 census	Georgians in the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast	28,544
2002 estimate	Georgians from South Ossetia displaced to Georgia proper	10,000
2003 estimate	Georgians and others living in Georgian-controlled South Ossetia	20,000
<b>August War</b>		
November 2008	Georgian military deaths in August war	169
November 2008	Georgian civilian deaths in August war	228
November 2008	Georgian policemen	16
November 2008	Total Georgian deaths <sup>a</sup>	413
November 2008	Georgian citizens wounded	2,237
September 2008	Russian military deaths in August war	71
September 2008	Russian military wounded in August war	340
September 2008 South Ossetian government figure	Civilian deaths in Tskhinvali in August war	365
September 2008	Number of displaced persons within Georgia proper	127,000
September 2008	Number of displaced persons within South Ossetia	30,000
September 2008	Number of displaced persons in North Ossetia	35,000
September 2008	Total displaced according to the UNHCR	192,000

<sup>a</sup>Excluding killed Dutch journalist.

Sources: Compiled by the author from International Crisis Group, 2004, 2005; Na 3 Sentyabrya, 2008; and UNHCR as well as Russian and Georgian government sources.

vacuum. The result was a period of anarchy and violence against ethnic minorities that left Georgian Ossetians fleeing for their lives to South and North Ossetia and others elsewhere (Wheatley, 2005; see Fig. 3).

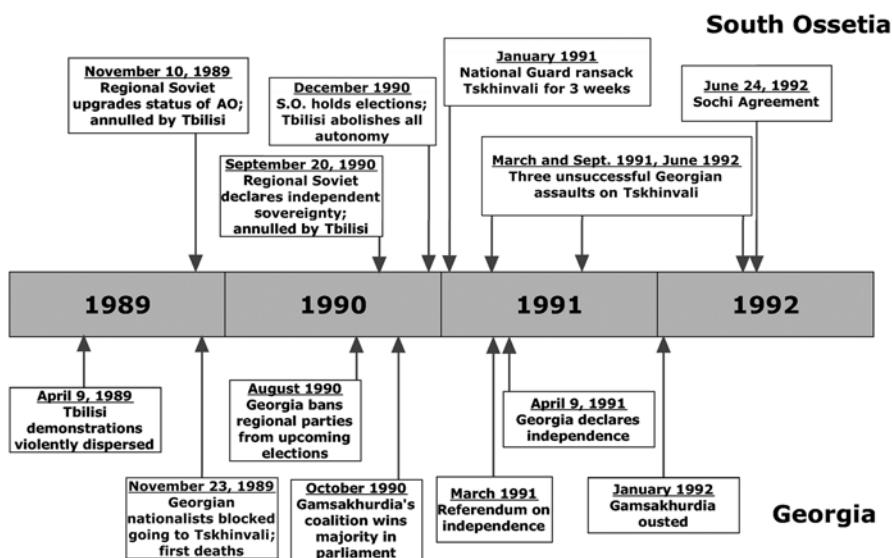


Fig. 3. Timeline of events, 1989–1992.

Increasingly radical ethnocentric policies in Tbilisi prompted counter-mobilization by Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The popular 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 autonomous oblast within Georgia. On November 10, 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 following day. In a tactic similar to that used by Slobodan Milošević's "anti-bureaucratic revolution" in Yugoslavia, Georgian nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia organized a cavalcade of protestors to go to Tskhinvali to demonstrate against the regional parliament's action as well as the recent passage of an Ossetian language law (Zürcher, 2007). The group's progress was blocked by counter-demonstrators at the outskirts of Tskhinvali, with clashes producing the first casualties. From this time onward, 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 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.<sup>10</sup> On 11 December, his government

<sup>10</sup>South Ossetia held its own elections on December 9, 1990, which the Gamskhurdia government refused to recognize.

abolished all autonomy granted to 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 (Fig. 4). 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 Yel’tsin in Sochi on June 24, 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, p. 4). Many horrific war crimes on both sides were perpetrated (Denber, 1992) and thousands were displaced from their homes, many of which were looted and damaged beyond repair.<sup>12</sup>

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) consisting of Georgian, Russian, and North and South Ossetian representatives plus those 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, which operated under a mandate from the JCC and the accumulation of agreements it developed. Protocols following the June 1992 agreement defined a “zone of conflict”—a circle of 15-kilometer radius measured from the center of Tskhinvali. It also established a “security corridor” that designated an area inside the former oblast and beyond it in Georgia proper where peacekeepers could establish checkpoints (see Fig. 1). 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 they were within the agreed security corridor (although, in practice, they tended not to cross into Georgia; Schwirtz and Barry, 2008). With a geographically circumscribed mandate, small numbers, local composition, and a limited international dimension, these forces were never equivalent to United Nations “peacekeepers” in other conflict zones, like IFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The most consequential division within South Ossetia was between villages that had become, over the course of the fighting, overwhelmingly “Georgian” or “Ossetian.” Inasmuch as about half of the Georgians and Ossetians in the region were linked by marriage, these descriptions were more imposed and political than reflective of the complex ethnic character of families within these settlements. Precisely because of the widespread

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<sup>11</sup>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 April 9, 1991.

<sup>12</sup>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).





**Fig. 4.** Statue of Ossetia’s national poet Kosta Khetagurov (disfigured in 1991 war) inside the South Ossetian theatre, Tskhinvali. Image courtesy of Tamaz Makiev.

intermarriage, Ossetian fighters in the region claimed they did not engage in the type of ethnic cleansing found in the Balkans. Rather, they attacked those they perceived as their political enemies, those siding with fascist nationalism, their governing understandings being closer to Soviet notions of multi-ethnicity than the exclusivist ethnonationalism found among the supporters of Gamsakurdia. Yet, in places, incidents of radical ethnized violence inevitably spawned retaliatory ethnized violence. The outcome left South Ossetia geopolitically divided into a majority of villages and towns administered and supported by the rump oblast authorities (supported in turn by North Ossetia and the Russian Federation) and a minority of villages supported by the Georgian government in Tbilisi.<sup>13</sup> But this was a condition of division without borders, without fully parceled territorial sovereignty (especially over uninhabited mountain regions), and with enduring infrastructural and human interconnectivities, a messy geopolitical conjuncture that challenged the standard geopolitical conventions of cartographic representation (the “non-operational zone of control” in Fig. 1 is an effort to acknowledge this).

The Sochi agreement was a 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. Measures addressing the return aspirations of displaced persons were only gestural. Little progress was made in JCC talks on the region’s status; the conflict became a

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<sup>13</sup>Akhalgori was the largest town under the control of Tbilisi. Additional Georgian-controlled areas included strings of villages north of Akhalgori and north and northeast of Tskhinvali, as well as six villages in the western part of the region (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 5.** Unloading of pipe in North Ossetia for construction of the Alagir–Tskhinvali natural gas pipeline. Photograph by the author, August 2007.

“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 toward the enclaves and the polarization of the Gamsakurdia years was avoided. The Russian Federation provided support (salaries and pensions) to South Ossetians but part of its infrastructure was still tied to Georgia. Tskhinvali, for example, depended on pipelines from Georgia proper for its gas heat.<sup>14</sup> A drinkable water supply pipeline ran from Edisi in the north to Tskhinvali, rehabilitated in recent years by European Union funds. In local elections, Lyudvig Chibirov, an Ossetian professor, came to power first as chairman of the parliament and then in 1996 as the first “president of South Ossetia.” In late 2001, he was defeated by Eduard Kokoity, a former Soviet wrestler, in a regional 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. President 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

<sup>14</sup>Because of South Ossetia’s dependence upon Georgia for gas, the Russian Federation began constructing a gas pipeline from North Ossetia (Fig. 5). The route is from Alagir to Zaramag (North Ossetia) and from there turning toward the southwest to cross the mountains at the Kudar Pass (approximately 20 km from the Mamison Pass in Fig. 1). From there it drops to Kvaisa in northwestern South Ossetia, traveling southeastward toward Gufta and then via the Zar road to Tskhinvali. By the summer of 2008, construction of the pipeline had progressed toward the Kudar Pass. In the wake of the August war, it is possible the pipeline will follow the direct road to Tskhinvali instead of the more indirect Zar road route (see below).

Abashidze in Adjara, a one-time Ottoman possession 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, 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 Georgia from Russia through the Ergneti market, a meeting place of traders from all sides southeast of Tskhinvali in Georgia 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 toward Java and onward toward the Roki Tunnel (the Transcaucasian Highway in Fig. 1) has been blocked by the mostly ethnically Georgian villages that straddle it (the Kekhvi-Tamarasheni internal enclave). The Saakashvili government refurbished an old access road that 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 that 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 on criminality, as Saakashvili claimed. After the fighting in 2004, 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, p. 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 percent 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.

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<sup>15</sup>On May 20, 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 militias. A memorial to the incident was dedicated at the site in 2007.

### 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 Mikheil Saakashvili was elected President with 96 percent of the vote. His National Movement–Democrats group took 67 percent of the seats in parliamentary elections in April 2004. 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 (January 25, 2004) was to change the Georgian flag from the 1918–1921-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. In this he received considerable help from Western governments and international development agencies. Georgia received substantial 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 lie 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 percent of the global crude supply (Chazan and Faucon, 2008). Nevertheless, these transit infrastructures became heavily interpreted objects in heated geostrategic discourses about energy resource competition and access to Caspian and Central Asian oil and gas (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 had been upbraided by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell for his moves against South Ossetia in 2004, but the U.S. government was split between pragmatists and neoconservatives, with Saakashvili temperamentally closer to the latter as they became ascendant after Powell’s departure.<sup>16</sup> Saakashvili cultivated strong relations with neoconservative circles in Washington, hiring the firm Orion Strategies to represent Georgia and addressing the think-tank home of neoconservatism, the American Enterprise Institute, in his visit to the city in July 2006.<sup>17</sup> In June 2005, Saakashvili managed to secure a U.S. 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

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<sup>16</sup>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. During the August war, Baran was featured on Georgian television calling for U.S. intervention to support Georgia.

<sup>17</sup>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 Georgia.

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’s 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. He also sharply increased military spending (Liklikadze, 2007). 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 before the present, he weathered large street demonstrations against his rule in November 2007. An International Crisis Group report on the drift toward 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 thought was orchestrated by the Americans, relations with Georgia reached a new level of hostility. Saakashvili attempted to cultivate good relations with Putin, but their personal meetings only deepened a general hostility into a personal loathing. Russian–Georgian relations went from bad to worse. In 2006, the Russian government imposed an embargo on 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 toward “managed democracy” or, as the Kremlin’s top ideologist Vladislav Surkov termed 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 focusing on common European security, NATO launched an expansionist program that violated pledges made at the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. In his February 2007 speech in Munich, 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 view the U.S. desire for former Soviet republics (such as 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,<sup>18</sup> the Putin administration saw an attempt to undermine the bargaining power of Russia in international energy markets.<sup>19</sup> Putin's policies in response contained four central elements: 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; reassert Russia's preeminent influence in "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" (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2006). 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 following NATO's Bucharest statement on April 4, 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" (Putin, 2008).<sup>20</sup> At the prior private Russian–NATO Council meeting, Putin was reported to have laid out the matter in clear zero-sum terms:

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<sup>18</sup>BTE forms a central link in the planned Nabucco natural gas pipeline from Turkey that would take Caspian Sea gas all the way to Austria.

<sup>19</sup>The alternative to Nabucco is the South Stream project that would take Gazprom gas from Russia through Romania and Bulgaria to western European markets. Analysts have argued that the Georgian war "has caused great damage to the viability of Nabucco" (Brett, 2008). For an analysis of the political economy of Russia and Europe's interdependence via major natural gas pipelines, see Ericson (2009).

<sup>20</sup>The latter is a reference to the promise by the first President Bush not to expand NATO.

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 Putin 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 led at a NATO heads-of-state dinner on April 3, was crossing Russian “red lines” (Cooper, et al., 2008). The U.S. 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 Felgengauer 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 (Felgengauer, 2008). On April 16, 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 April 21, quickly degenerated into an exchange of offensive language (Traub, 2008).

### THE CRISIS UNFOLDS

Tensions between Georgia and South Ossetian forces, backed by North Ossetia 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 overflights of South Ossetian and Georgian proper airspace. In August 2007, Russian planes allegedly fired a missile at a Georgian village (Gorst and Schmid, 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 occurred in July 2008, when four Russian warplanes circled South Ossetia while U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was visiting Georgia’s capital, Tbilisi. And prior to the war both sides had engaged in military exercises. In July, a two-week war-game exercise “Immediate Response 2008” gathered 1,000 U.S. 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. And from July 15 to August 4, “Kavkaz 2008” brought together over 8,000 Russian Federation troops from across the Caucasus in a large scale “counterterrorist” exercise.<sup>21</sup> Among the latter 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).

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<sup>21</sup>The ending of the “Kavkaz 2008” exercise marks the beginning of the timeline of the August 2008 events chronicled in Figure 6.

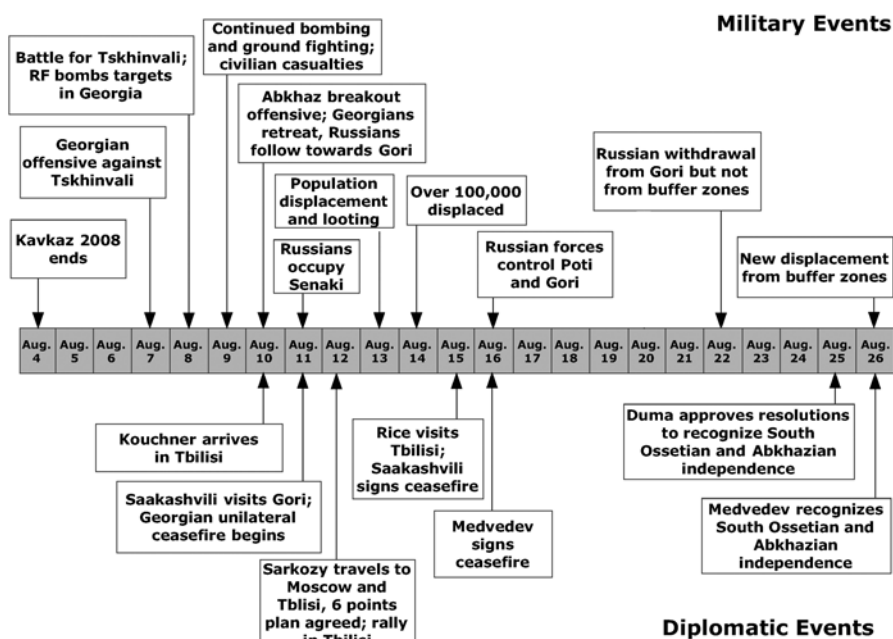


Fig. 6. Timeline of events in August 2008.

The origins of the escalation which led to all-out war are, as one might expect, in dispute (Finn, 2008b). On August 1, a Georgian police vehicle was destroyed by a land mine, planted presumably by South Ossetian forces, and six people were 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 August 2 and 3. A cease-fire failed to hold as skirmishes continued.

Heavy fighting resumed on August 6, before planned meetings of Russian, Ossetian, and Georgian officials on the 8<sup>th</sup>. The Georgian government later claimed, on the basis of secret recordings, that during the early hours of August 7, 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 7<sup>th</sup> as routine support for their peacekeepers). President Saakashvili also claimed that around 11:00 p.m. on August 7, 150 Russian tanks invaded Georgia through the Roki Tunnel. That afternoon Marat Kulakhmetov, commander of the Russian peacekeeping forces, Eduard Kokoity, president of South Ossetia and Temuri Yakobashvili, the Georgian Minister for Reintegration, met to discuss the escalating fighting with Kulakhmetov, suggesting that Yakobashvili telephone Saakashvili to propose a unilateral cease-fire. At 7:30 p.m. 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). Other sources suggest sustained shelling of Georgian villages since August 2 (Tsamalashvili and Whitmore, 2008). At 9:30 p.m. Russian peacekeepers observed columns of Georgian tanks moving toward Tskhinvali from the south. Georgian peacekeepers serving jointly with their Russian colleagues left their posts at this point (Clover, et al., 2008).<sup>22</sup> During a news broadcast that began at 11 p.m., the head of Georgian peacekeepers in the area, General Mamuka Kurashvili, 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 p.m., the advancing Georgian forces south of Tskhinvali began shelling the city with truck-based GRAD rockets.<sup>23</sup> OSCE monitors in the city counted rounds exploding at intervals of 15 to 20 seconds (Chivers and Barry, 2008).<sup>24</sup> Georgian forces then advanced past the positions of Russian peacekeepers—killed by Georgian forces<sup>25</sup>—into the outskirts of Tskhinvali in the early hours of August 8. While most attention was focused on the subsequent battle for Tskhinvali, Georgian forces attacked the quasi-state more broadly 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 58<sup>th</sup> Russian army base in Vladikavkaz into the region. Some tank columns were on their way to the Roki Tunnel by 2 a.m. (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 for South Ossetia. “Volunteers” also 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” would not go unpunished (Clover and Morris, 2008). North Ossetian President Taymuraz 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.<sup>26</sup> There were many reports of widespread deaths, with estimates ranging from ca. 500 to 2,000. Russian television broadcast the latter figure, which was later revised downward. Russian aircraft—Sukhoi

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<sup>22</sup>Whether monitors from the OSCE did so is disputed.

<sup>23</sup>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).

<sup>24</sup>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).

<sup>25</sup>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).

<sup>26</sup>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/>.



**Fig. 7.** Destroyed Georgian tanks in Tskhinvali. Photograph by Alan Tatarov, August 2008.

25 close air support aircraft, Tupolev 22 reconnaissance planes, and Mi-24 helicopter gunships—were soon in the air and at daybreak began engaging Georgian planes (which were attacking Russian forces exiting the Roki tunnel with cluster munitions) and Georgian forces in South Ossetia.<sup>27</sup> Between two and six Russian aircraft were shot down, one a Tupolev 22. Around noon on the August 8, 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 such 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 are “under our control.” But its advancing forces were checked by local Ossetian militias and the arriving Russian military and forced into a retreat toward Gori by the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup>; the last Georgian forces were not forced out of South Ossetia until Sunday, August 10 (Clover, et al., 2008; Fig. 7).

The second phase was the Russian counterattack that 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.

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<sup>27</sup>The Russians suffered early losses exiting the Roki Tunnel, and a Russian general in command of the 58<sup>th</sup> Army was wounded in an ambush by Georgian soldiers.

Two apartment blocks were hit in Gori, killing at least seven civilians on the morning of August 9. Some villages in the vicinity of Tskhinvali were also targeted. On the ground, it took four days for Russian forces to establish full control over South Ossetia. From August 10, they extended their lines beyond the internal security corridor within the region to occupy Georgian villages within South Ossetia. The village of Kakhvi 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 it. 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 it began on August 10 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 cease-fire agreement and cessation of hostilities. President Sarkozy of France, in his capacity as President of the Council of the European Union, flew to Moscow on August 12 (Fig. 6) 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 became the basis for the establishment of "buffer zones" by the Russian military, acting in 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 established 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 August 15 and by Medvedev the following day (Fig. 6). Russian forces slowly began pulling back from their maximum positions within Georgia proper. Many returned to the 58<sup>th</sup> 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, Kemetri, Dzartsemi, Kurta, Zemo Achabeti (Verkhnyye Achaveti in Russian), Kheiti, Kvemo Achabeti (Nizhniye Achaveti in Russian), and Tamarasheni—north of Tskhinvali on August 12 (Human Rights Watch, 2008c) (see Fig. 1). 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).<sup>28</sup> Revenge attacks and spontaneous ethnicized violence later spread to Georgian property in the villages of Eredvi, Berula, and Argvitsi to the west of Tskhinvali<sup>29</sup> and Ditsi, 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, 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 August 25, UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees) 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 the security situation. In response, the UNHCR began erecting shelter tents on the local football field (UNHCR, 2008a).

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 October 10, and the deployment of at least 200 European Union monitors by October 1. The Russian withdrawal was completed on October 8, 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 Akhgori in South Ossetia and from the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia—areas administered by Georgia before the August war, and it is now questionable whether this will happen at all (Trofimov, 2008).<sup>30</sup> 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 Transcaucasus Highway 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. First, the Saakashvili government allowed itself to become caught within an escalating logic of force

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<sup>28</sup>For a UNOSAT analysis of the damage to these villages based on a satellite image acquired on August 19, 2008 see: [http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/freeproducts/Georgia/Russia\\_ConflictAug08/UNOSAT\\_GEO\\_Village\\_Damage\\_Summary\\_Tskhinvali\\_19aug08\\_Highres.pdf](http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/freeproducts/Georgia/Russia_ConflictAug08/UNOSAT_GEO_Village_Damage_Summary_Tskhinvali_19aug08_Highres.pdf)

<sup>29</sup>See [http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/freeproducts/Georgia/Russia\\_ConflictAug08/update2/UNOSAT\\_GEO\\_Damage\\_Assessment\\_EREDVI\\_19aug08\\_Highres.pdf](http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/freeproducts/Georgia/Russia_ConflictAug08/update2/UNOSAT_GEO_Damage_Assessment_EREDVI_19aug08_Highres.pdf)

<sup>30</sup>Russian forces did withdraw from the ethnically mixed village of Mosabruni, south of Akhgori and within the boundaries of Soviet South Ossetia around August 20, but returned on August 25 to re-establish a checkpoint and evict the Georgian police (Pan and Finer, 2008).

in its conflict with South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and ultimately Russia. Its proclivity toward force played into the hands of its opponents—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. Second, the Saakashvili government decided to escalate the conflict on the night of August 7 for its own reasons.<sup>31</sup> Was this an attempt to take advantage of the distraction of the opening of the Olympics? Was it genuinely informed by the assumption that Georgian forces 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?<sup>32</sup> 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 imprudence 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). We now 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 August 8, Saakashvili stated that “we initiated military operations after separatist rebels in South Ossetia bombed Tamarsheni 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” (Saakashvili, 2008b). 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

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<sup>31</sup>Some Russian officials, and many ordinary citizens, saw an American hand in the Georgian offensive, but there is no hard evidence for such a claim. That the U.S. government sent positive signals to Georgia by arming it and backing its membership in NATO so vociferously can be argued, but it appears U.S. policymakers were taken aback at the Georgian action (Fromkin, 2008). One Pentagon official stated: “The Georgians figured it was better to ask forgiveness later, but not ask for permission first. It was a decision on their part. They knew we would say ‘no’” (Cooper and Shanker, 2008). Anatol Lieven has argued that Washington had not the slightest intention of defending Georgia. He concluded that under no circumstances should the West extend NATO security guarantees to countries it does not intend to defend. “To do so would be irresponsible, unethical and above all contemptible” (Lieven, 2008).

<sup>32</sup>In an interview, Georgian Deputy Defense Minister Batu Kutelia (now Minister) admitted that they were completely unprepared for a Russian counterattack, especially anti-tank and air defenses. “Unfortunately, we attached a low priority to this. We did not prepare for this kind of eventuality” (Cienski, 2008).

**Table 2.** Competing Georgian and Russian Federation Storylines on the August 2008 War

Storyline features:	Georgian Government storyline	Russian Government storyline
Situation description	Russian invasion. Unprovoked attack on the West, freedom, civilized values, democracy. Cutting the bloodlines of the economy.	Humanitarian action to prevent genocide.
Historical analogies	Invasion of Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968, 1938), Afghanistan (1979). German attack on Poland (1939). Russian attack on Finland (1939).	Appeasement of Hitler by the West. Tskhinvali, a hero city, the “Stalingrad of the Caucasus.” Like NATO intervention in Kosovo. Saakashvili as Saddam Hussein.
Local analogies	Bolshevik invasion and takeover of independent Georgia (1921).	Third Georgian genocidal campaign against Ossetians (after 1921 and 1988–1992).
Downscaled primary metaphor	Aggression. A big bully is attacking a small nation (person). “Looking into the eyes of evil.”	Aggression. Madness. Deranged person attacking innocents.
Description of South Ossetians	Illegal separatists. Controlled by Russians. Fifth columnists. Criminals. Sudeten Germans.	Russian citizens (passport holders). A small victimized people.
Description of Other	People with KGB backgrounds; return of Soviet system. Twenty-first century barbarians.	NATO ally. American stooge.
Geopolitical metaphors	(Westernizing) Not “a faraway place” (Chamberlain) but a modern normal country that loves America.	(Localizing) Area of privileged interest.
Explaining discordant information	(that Georgia started it): Big powers lie and use minorities to serve pre-established aims.	(that Russia is the aggressor): The West uses double standards to judge the behavior of Russia. Their actions are cynical.
Triggering event	Russian build-up and tanks moving through Roki Tunnel.	Georgian attack on Tskhinvali and murder of Russian peacekeepers.
Attribution of motives	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.”	Desperate attempt to get into NATO and acquire Western aid. Distraction from domestic problems. Actions of a bloodthirsty lunatic.
Meaning of crisis	Invasion of a sovereign country. Wake-up call to new Cold War between freedom-loving peoples and restored KGB regime/evil empire. Ukraine next.	War against states that violate international law. Responsibility to protect. Need for new security architecture for Europe.

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” (ibid.).

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 (Levy, 2008).<sup>33</sup> Let us consider a few of the many available examples.

In an appearance on CNN on August 9, 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 was beyond his expectations, Saakashvili pitched Georgia as one of the countries friendliest toward 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 August 11: 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 John McCain as well as analogies made by leading U.S. neoconservatives to Hitler and Czechoslovakia in 1938 (Dobbs, 2008; 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 known. “I heard Senator McCain saying we are all Georgians now. I hope people understand that these are their values

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<sup>33</sup>By contrast, his voice was dubbed in a shrill Russian on Russian television.

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 referring to the Karelian region’s experience as comparable to the South Ossetia case (how was not clear since most of the region remains part of Russia, hardly inspiring yet potentially instructive about the future of Georgia, where political life may have no choice but to eventually reconcile itself to the territorial losses) (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 Russian 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 Kurdistan Workers’ Party [PKK] within Turkey). The Georgian Prime Minister Lado Gurgenedze 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 that 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 ample public evidence for their contempt for Saakashvili. This led to considerable speculation whether Russian troops would march on Tbilisi. Indeed Saakashvili himself spread panic by stating as much on Georgian television on August 12 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 August 13, 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 rampaging 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 interviewer 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).

## Russia

At the center of the Russian storyline on the crisis is the "fact" that the Russian Federation did not start the August war; Georgia was "the aggressor." The initial response by Russian Federation leaders to the Georgian attack was a legalistic one—the military response was described on the 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 8 ends with a similar declaration: "The perpetrators will receive the punishment they deserve" (Medvedev, 2008i). Three aspects of this initial statement are important as geopolitical speech acts. First, Medvedev reproclaimed 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 constituted 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).<sup>34</sup> Third, Medvedev used 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"—underwrite the initial Russian response. In construction, they recall historical American justifications for intervention in Central America and Mexico—its so-called "backyard"<sup>35</sup>—although 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."

Overnight 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

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<sup>34</sup>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 prior to Saakashvili's reforms.

<sup>35</sup>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).

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” broadcast) 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).<sup>36</sup>

What was a “gross violation of international law” on August 8, requiring a Russian response under Article 51 of the UN Charter in self-defense (inasmuch as Russian peacekeepers and Russian citizens were attacked), was promoted on August 10 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 1988–1992 period—as the most appropriate 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 (August 10) 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 led to numerous civilian casualties and has created a humanitarian disaster and that is a crime against the Ossetian people (Death Toll, 2008).

Like Western leaders during the Kosovo crisis, Putin distinguished between the Georgian people and the criminal actions of their leadership.<sup>37</sup> And like the Kosovo case, Russia invoked a “responsibility to protect” a people who were suffering “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide.”<sup>38</sup> These criminal acts justified the possible revocation of Georgian sovereignty,

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<sup>36</sup>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 militias 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, 2008e). 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 their specific temporal and locational figure as a substitute for all deaths in South Ossetia (Human Rights Watch, 2008d). The Russian Public Investigation Commission on the number of deaths from the Georgian assault has identified 365 names thus far (<http://www.ossetia-war.com/dvlist>).

<sup>37</sup>There is an incoherence in the interpellation strategies—those hailing collective identity—used by the Russian government at this time. Medvedev calls out South Ossetians as Russian citizens, while Putin calls them out as Georgian citizens (as prologue to questioning this identity).

<sup>38</sup>The Russian government claimed greater legitimacy for its action than those of NATO in Kosovo in 1999. First, Russian forces were already UN approved peacekeepers in the region; no such equivalent existed in Kosovo. Second, the victims were not citizens of another country being abused by their government but a people who had chosen Russian citizenship.

an option that became an actuality when the Russian Federation eventually recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia on August 26.

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" (Barnard, 2008). 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.<sup>39</sup> 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).<sup>40</sup> 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 1990s, 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" (Lavrov, 2008b). 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" (ibid.). 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" (ibid.). Dmitry Rogozin made a similar case in the *International Herald Tribune* about the need to respond to Saakashvili's order to "wipe Tskhinvali . . . from the face of the earth" (Rogozin, 2008). His

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<sup>39</sup>Dmitry Rogozin, Russian ambassador to NATO, said that Georgian troops "shot their brother Russian peacekeepers, then they finished them off with bayonets" (Traynor, 2008b).

<sup>40</sup>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 12<sup>th</sup> as Russian tanks loomed before Tbilisi (Barnard et al., 2008).

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.<sup>41</sup>

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 fulfill 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 be expected, Russian leaders also cited older precedents and analogies from Russian geopolitical culture (including some of the same ones cited by neoconservatives in Georgia 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 bloodthirsty lunatic.<sup>42</sup> The memory of the Great Patriotic War was 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 Mariinskiy 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” evoking images 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 August 26. 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, 2008j). 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*” (Medvedev, 2008d). 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” (*ibid.*). Yet they

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<sup>41</sup>The Mladić photograph can be seen on Rogozin’s personal web page: <http://www.rogozin.ru/>

<sup>42</sup>Announcing the ceasefire agreement on August 12, 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” (Medvedev, 2008g).

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, 2008c). 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, 2008e).

## 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." Among fast-lane cosmopolitans, such visions can induce dangerous geopolitical fantasies. This is arguably the case with the Saakashvili government, which promoted the vision that Georgia could unplug from its Communist past and Caucasian location and re-configure itself within 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 toward 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 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 toward 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 neoconservatism and revolutionary reformism propelled Georgia on a polarizing path toward NATO membership when other options, like neutrality or non-alignment, were more prudent adaptations to Georgia's geopolitical context.<sup>43</sup> Saakashvili's uncritical embrace of neoconservative foreign policy and neoliberal economics has been sustained by irresponsible promises from the Bush administration (and its NATO allies) of eventual NATO membership and access to significant amounts of credit and aid from Western governments and international institutions. Georgian military support for the Iraq war and U.S. troop training exercises in Georgia most likely induced the belief that there was an emergent special relationship between the states. Modern

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<sup>43</sup>A former Georgian ambassador to Moscow, Erosi Kitsmarishvili expressed the options succinctly when he said, "I don't want to live in the new Caucasian Israel. I'd rather live in the new Caucasian Ireland" (cited in Steavenson, 2008).

communications (like daily phone calls with world leaders during a crisis), significant Western investment, and young, Western-educated aides further enabled the fantasy that Georgia could create geopolitical proximity to the Euro-Atlantic world through force of technology, money, and personal politics.<sup>44</sup>

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 ego-politics. Saakashvili's personal bond of friendship with George W. Bush and John McCain was fostered 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 uncontained 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's distinctiveness, need to be recognized as factors on their own terms. Nor should the memory and bitter legacy of reciprocal rounds of ethnic cleansing be marginalized. While some population returns have been possible, returns to Georgian areas deep within South Ossetia may not be viable, and revenge is likely to be a poison in the area for some time.<sup>45</sup> As an independent state Georgia never enjoyed the full territorial integrity it currently claims over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In uncritically supporting this maximalist claim, Euro-Atlantic powers are aligning themselves to a cause—inevitably entwined with ethnocentric tendencies in Georgian nationalism—that is now effectively lost. Saakashvili appeared too similar to Gamsakhurdia for many Ossetians, the Georgian state too prone to crusading excesses. Whatever the legal merits of the case, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not likely to ever be parts of an independent Georgian state in the future. Borders have not been agreed to in the area but the sooner that is the case the better it is likely to be for those displaced from their homes, living in marginal settler camps, and treated for years as political pawns. Regularized borders could also help combat contraband commerce and entrenched criminality in the enclaves, something that should be of concern to everyone.<sup>46</sup> As Neal Acheson has argued, its time for these powers to stop talking about "Georgian territorial integrity" and about "breakaway regions of Georgia" as if their "illegal secession" can be reversed; the important question is how their independence can be recognized and made real (Acheson, 2008). The Russian Federation has taken on two client states that may prove expensive and awkward to manage; it has also unleashed its own precedent following on from that of Kosovo that is already adding to its difficulties in the North

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<sup>44</sup>During the crisis, Georgian president Saakashvili indicated that he talked to Republican presidential candidate John McCain several times a day. The *Washington Post* noted that "McCain's involvement in the military conflict in Georgia appears remarkable among presidential candidates, who traditionally have kept some distance from unfolding crises out of deference to whoever is occupying the White House" (Eggen and Barnes, 2008).

<sup>45</sup>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 1990s (UNHCR, 2008a).

<sup>46</sup>On cases of counterfeit currency operations and nuclear smuggling in South Ossetia see Bronner (2008).

Caucasus. Russia's actions have not brought it greater security; instead they have damaged its international reputation and raised fears among its neighbors and potential partners.

Any Russian representation of its actions in Georgia as "like Kosovo" should be challenged (Talbot, 2008). Rather than a conversion to "responsibility to protect" norms, there is evidence of a continuity of attitudes within the Russian state, a cynical conception of "humanitarian intervention" as a fig-leaf for NATO in Kosovo and, therefore, available for similar use by the Kremlin in Georgia. The number of casualties from the initial Georgian assault on the Tskhinvali region was inflated and rhetoric was too easily ratcheted up to the charge of "genocide." Subsequent official figures have not borne out earlier claims of 2,000 dead. While the Kosovo and South Ossetian situations are structurally similar,<sup>47</sup> their histories and dynamics are quite different. The Georgian attack on Tskhinvali was on a smaller scale than the Serbian military campaign against Kosovar Albanians. The NATO-led response was a collective international one and not that of one state. Kosovo subsequently developed representative institutions and human rights mechanisms to meet international norms. While not sanctioned by the UN Security Council, its independence was declared only after an exhaustive process of international negotiations that failed to resolve its status. The declaration has attracted moderate international support (Antonenko, 2008). By contrast, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia are much more directly Russian client statelets with no significant international legitimacy beyond their relationship with the Russian Federation. It ratified a friendship treaty with both on November 12, 2008 that will see it build military bases in each. United for now by structural dependence on Russia, the two enclaves have different potentials. Abkhazia, unlike South Ossetia, could become a viable Black Sea state with the right engagement beyond Russia (Acheson, 2008). South Ossetia's connection with North Ossetia means it is more likely to be annexed directly by the Russian Federation in the future.

The conflict in Georgia is likely to fester for some time, especially if the low-level violence that has characterized the peace continues. At a Georgia donor's conference on October 22, 2008, Western institutions and states pledged \$4.5 billion to rebuild Georgia, a billion beyond the World Bank's target amount and a significant statement of their continued commitment to the state (Barry, 2008). Separating this from support for Saakashvili's leadership is required, but may prove difficult as he seeks to personally embody the Georgian nation to face down domestic challenges. Buffeted by the global financial crisis, the Russian state has moved away from bellicose rhetoric and appears to be re-prioritizing around geo-economic rather than geopolitical goals for the state. These tendencies and new leadership in Washington, D.C. offer possibilities for positive change at the end of a turbulent year in which the graduation of quasi-states to independence has reminded us that sticky territorial conflicts have the power to polarize major powers no matter how minor they ultimately are in a world of profound global financial crises and common security challenges like climate change and nuclear proliferation.

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<sup>47</sup>Both involve territorially concentrated minority peoples in quasi-state regions in confrontation with a larger ethnocratic state with a history of oppressive violence.

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