

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Previously Published Works

Title

With Friends Like These: Brinkmanship and Chain-Ganging in Russia's Near Abroad

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1151x9fs>

Journal

Security Studies, 25(4)

ISSN

0963-6412

Authors

Driscoll, Jesse

Maliniak, Daniel

Publication Date

2016-10-01

DOI

10.1080/09636412.2016.1220208

Peer reviewed

With Friends Like These: Brinkmanship & Chain-Ganging in Russia's Near Abroad

Jesse Driscoll and Daniel Maliniak

Forthcoming in Security Studies

Unrecognized statelets may be forming in the Eastern Donbas region of Ukraine under the aegis of Russian protection—a “frozen conflict.” Georgia’s past provides a useful cautionary tale in reference to Ukraine’s probable future. The very same conceptual debates that are currently underway in the West with respect to Ukraine—“credibility of great-power security guarantees versus chain-ganging”—have, over the past twenty years, generated policies that facilitated the rise of political coalitions within Georgia that prefer war with Russia to any other outcome.

At the time of this writing, there is an eerily familiar debate underway on the appropriate Western response to Russian military adventurism in its near abroad. At one end of the spectrum is a “give Russia space” camp. At the other end is a “deter and contain Russia by extending security guarantees to its neighbors” camp. A well-rehearsed argument against extending security guarantees is entrapment, often motivated by the metaphor of chain-ganging.¹ The

Jesse Driscoll is an assistant professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California, San Diego. Daniel Maliniak is an assistant professor in the Government Department at the College of William and Mary.

phrase is evocative of a logic by which a state is dragged in to a conflict where it has no easily identifiable national interests.² The chain-ganging argument further emphasizes that security guarantees can change the strategy of the recipient, creating incentives for political elites in the weaker state to engage in risky crisis-escalation strategies (anticipating a more favorable settlement by fighting a war, and being “bailed out” by a strong ally, than they could expect in

¹ Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 137–68. They argued that, before World War I, European leaders behaved as if they were in a “chain gang” (making strong alliance commitments, making it more likely that they would be forced to fight a system-level war that they did not actually want to fight), which is a stark contrast to the “buck-passing” behaviors that the same community of states exhibited before World War II (trying harder to maintain flexibility of action and avoid conflict, with the unforeseeable consequence of encouraging Hitler’s revisionism). The authors argue that changes in the perceived balance between offense and defensive military technologies explain alliance behaviors.

² Examples might include going to war over issues of reputation, and *only* reputation, or going to war out of fear of the downstream consequences of an ally switching sides and joining an opposing alliance. See Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 124–25; Dominic Tierney, “Does Chain-Ganging Cause the Outbreak of War?” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (June 2011): 285–304. In chain ganging, states support allies out of a correct evaluation of their own national interests, which would be harmed if the ally were to switch sides and disrupted the balance of power. See Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 7–48, esp. 14 who makes this point to analytically distinguish “chain-ganging” from “entanglement,” in which alliances “drag states into conflicts against their interests.”

the status quo). There are many historical examples in which expectation of assistance from a strong state probably created incentives for irresponsible risk-taking and provocation by the allied state.³ On the other hand, credible security guarantees can deter aggression, and abandoning friends in a time of need may limit the credibility of these sorts of military commitments. This abandonment versus entrapment debate is extremely well rehearsed, and the stalled debate on the wisdom of extending security guarantees to Russia's neighbors partially reflects an inability to empirically disentangle and weigh these two countervailing effects.⁴

In this essay, we draw attention to a set of “second-image” state characteristics that can emerge in post-Soviet states in expectation of Western security assistance. Our argument is simple: When the potential ally in question is fanatical about territorial revisionism and also entrepreneurial about altering its domestic institutions to suit the preferences of potential allies, a formal or informal alliance is unlikely to induce intra-alliance restraint.⁵ We use data from

³ Brett Ashley Leeds popularized “offensive alliances” as an analytic construct.” See Leeds, “Do Alliances Deter Aggression? The Influence of Military Alliances on the Initiation of Militarized Interstate Disputes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (July 2003): 427–39.

⁴ A *Foreign Affairs*’ survey of twenty-nine scholarly experts reveals deep disagreement within the community of North American academic area specialists. Both the polarization of responses and the high levels of self-reported certainty are informative. See “Who Is at Fault in Ukraine?” *Foreign Affairs*, 9 November 2014, accessed 15 February 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142345/who-is-at-fault-in-ukraine>.

⁵ One of the underappreciated contributions of alliances to the absence of interstate war is that members tend to restrain each other. For empirically grounded, policy-relevant commentary on “alliance induced restraint,” see Beckley “Myth of Entangling Alliances”; Tierney, “Does Chain-Ganging Cause the Outbreak of War?,” 290–92, 302.

Georgia in the first two decades of its independence to make our argument.

The primary contribution of this paper is to provide an analytic sketch of various relevant facts about the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. We introduce the reader to the conflict and theorize why it broke out as it did, in an effort to distill a few policy-relevant lessons from the experience. Our central argument is that Western promises of engagement with Georgia—particularly offering implicit security guarantees while Georgian elites gradually steered the conversation toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—were necessary conditions for the 2008 Russo-Georgian War as it occurred. The goal of this paper is not to present the definitive account of the war, but rather to organize and synthesize various strands of elite and journalistic discourse about the conflict. Interstate wars are rare events that reward close observation from multiple vantage points, so following Kenneth Waltz, we sort analytically useful explanations for the war into the familiar three images.⁶ We hope that once the various third- and first-image explanations are cataloged in a relatively comprehensive manner, the residual second-image picture that remains will be informative to policymakers. Our argument has elements of both the classic “second-image” theories as well as Peter Gourevitch’s “second-image reversed” argument.⁷ While broader strategic factors were certainly at play, and certain individual personalities played key roles, the 2008 war cannot be explained through structure or personality alone. The conflict that occurred represented the will of Russian and Georgian nationalist voters. The paper concludes with the observation that the situation emerging in Ukraine appears to share

⁶ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 16.

⁷ Peter Gourevitch, “The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics,” *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 881–912.

some of Georgia's most troubling characteristics.

DISPUTED HISTORIES, STRUCTURAL FACTORS, AND THE AUGUST 2008 WAR

Four stylized facts about the Georgian case are important preambles to set the stage before we can properly begin the “third image” analysis.⁸ The first is that the Georgians and the Russians understand the Russian role in the South Caucasus very differently. When the Soviet Union broke apart peacefully, Georgia was one of the violent exceptions to the rule. The civil war that broke out in Georgia as the Soviet experiment ended claimed as many as twenty thousand lives and culminated in ethnic cleansing.⁹ As the Soviet tide retreated, beached Russian military units—sometimes still in familiar Soviet uniforms and sometimes wearing black ski masks—joined with patriotic paramilitary units from neighboring republics in the North

⁸ By “stylized facts” we mean observations that are widely shared and not so obviously false as to completely stop the conversation.

⁹ For a narrative treatment of the causes and consequences of this war, see Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. 46–70, 81–94, as well as Ghia Nodia, “The Conflict in Abkhazia: National Projects and Political Circumstances,” in *Georgians and Abkhazians: The Search for a Peace Settlement*, ed. Bruno Coppieters, Ghia Nodia, and Yury Anchabadze (Cambridge MA: BIOst, 1998); Dodge Billingsley, “Military Aspects of the War: The Battle for Gagra,” in *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, ed. George Hewitt (New York: Curzon Press, 1999), 147–56; Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia: From National Awakening to the Rose Revolution—Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union* (London: Ashgate, 2005), 41–102.

Caucasus to intervene into Georgia's war.¹⁰ But it is widely acknowledged that Russian peacekeeping—or “peacemaking” as the word *mirotvorchestvo* is more accurately translated—was justified on humanitarian grounds, creating a safe zone or safe haven for non-Georgian ethnic minorities.¹¹ The result was de facto independent unrecognized microstates—typically termed “frozen conflicts” (see Figure 1).¹² Moscow treats its role in Georgia as guaranteeing the security of beleaguered minorities—exactly the same role that many in the West imagined themselves to be playing when they enforced the no-fly zone in Iraqi Kurdistan or assisted paramilitary militias in Kosovo as they seceded from Serbia. The difference, for Russians, is that, contra NATO's humanitarian interventions into Iraqi or Serbian

¹⁰ G. M. Derluguian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 260–73.

¹¹ Since Russian policy was inconsistent and Georgian state failure in the early 1990s was confusing, it is not clear that there would have been any practical distinction between safe zones and safe havens in the case of either South Ossetia or Abkhazia, though the analytic distinction is made clear in Barry Posen, “Military Responses to Refugee Disasters,” *International Security*, 21, no. 1 (Summer 1996): 77–78, 93–98, esp. 94 for the discussion of “*de facto* secession,” which, in retrospect, seems very prescient.

¹² Charles King, “The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States,” *World Politics* 53, no. 4 (July 2001): 524–52. See also Dmitri Trenin, “Russian Peacemaking in Georgia,” in *Crisis Management in the CIS: Whither Russia?* ed. Hans-Georg Ehrhard, Anna Kreikenmeyer, and Andrei Zagorski (Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1995); Christoph Zurcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

domestic affairs, Georgia is unambiguously inside Russia's traditional sphere of influence.¹³ But many Georgians would dispute practically every facet of this account. Suffice it to say, for now, that the position of the Georgian government is that deference to a "Russian sphere of influence" is inappropriate and immoral. To balance against Moscow, Tbilisi has courted Western security guarantees and NATO membership for the past two decades. Georgia's position, which has remained consistent since the early 1990s across many ideologically-diverse Georgian governments, is that the Russian military presence within Georgia's borders is illegal.

¹³ Our use of rhetoric should not be the source of confusion. Though we occasionally deploy the terms "spheres of influence" or "Russia's backyard," these concepts are not meant to convey any more reality than any of the other constructed objects of realist discourse. Still, this part of the map is instinctively associated with Russia because of the the institutional legacy of the Soviet experience and the demographic legacy of hundreds of years of military history. Few outside of Georgia associate it with Europe at the time of this writing.



FIGURE 1 Georgia, its neighbors, and its contested map

Second, most Georgian voters want to see their country reclaim the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Many Georgians believe that these lands are an ancient part of Georgia and were basically taken from them unjustly by Russia as punishment for refusing to join the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). The complex events of the early 1990s are historiographically contested and will be summarized elsewhere in the paper, but for many Georgians a popular simplifying heuristic is “Russians invaded two decades ago, never left, and we are currently under occupation.” In a survey of Georgian citizens, conducted in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 August War, respondents were asked to rank order seven different

potential national priorities.¹⁴ The exercise was designed to see how respondents would evaluate complex trade-offs between different values, each of which they might individually desire. The results are displayed in Figure 2. Support for reclaiming the secessionist regions was a top priority for over thirty percent of respondents and is one of the top three priorities for most of the sample. This result holds even once the sample is partitioned to account for those who reported disapproving of the president or the subsections most likely to hold cosmopolitan or liberal values. The second prioritized goal, which a majority of respondents put in their top three issues, was forging better military relations with the West.¹⁵ The inference we draw from these trends is that many Georgians share the realist intuition that Russia's power is on the decline and plan to wait the Russians out and then settle the territorial dispute on more favorable terms with Western assistance. Consistent with this interpretation is that the least-prioritized issue, for a plurality of respondents in the sample, was repairing relations with Russia.

¹⁴ A large (N=3143) nationally representative survey was implemented by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), which serves as the basis for the empirical generalizations that follow. This survey represented the first large-scale data collection effort in Georgia after the war. The sample was chosen to be representative of potential Georgian swing voters, so no efforts were made to sample in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or the non-Georgian ethnic enclaves. The data are biased by “rally ’round the flag” dynamics in Georgian society just after the 2008 war—but we believe this makes them especially relevant for making analogies relevant to political trends in Ukraine at the time of this writing.

¹⁵ Elsewhere on the survey, 61 percent of Georgians agreed with the statement that “Good relations with the West are just a means to the end of reclaiming the territories. If I had the choice, I would never give up on the dream of national reunification.” Full text of all questions is available through the CRRC.

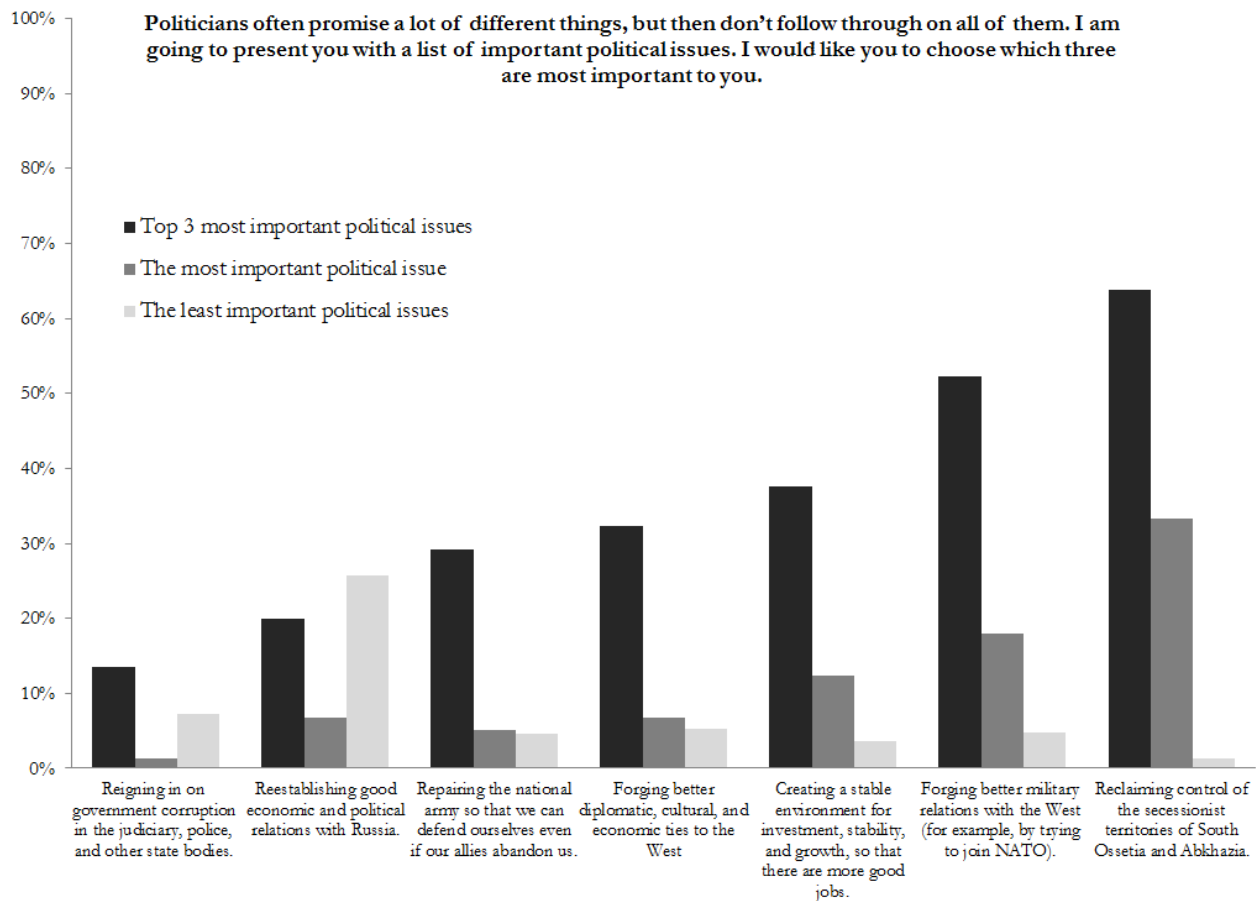


FIGURE 2 What Georgians say they want (and don't), part I)

Third, most citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia understand themselves to be bargaining chips in a geopolitical game played between Russia and Georgia. The government of Georgia is trying to reframe the game as a conversation between Russia and “the West” with itself in the latter coalition. If Georgians succeeded, Abkhaz and South Ossetians would lose the autonomy they have enjoyed since the early 1990s.¹⁶ These “shadow states” have established

¹⁶ The same also used to be true of Adjara, a territory where the citizens are ethnically Georgian but Muslim by confession, and were functionally independent up until 2004, protected from Georgian

customs houses, foreign ministries, flags, national histories, and many other trappings of statehood.¹⁷ In 1994, diplomatic representatives of the Clinton administration initially took steps to scrutinize the Russian intervention in the South Caucasus but had to back down on this position once they realized that they needed the Russian vote in the UN Security Council to legitimize the US intervention in Haiti.¹⁸ Georgia's persistence in pressing its territorial claims is an important signal of national resolve, and this situation is clearly understood in more-or-less the same way by actors in both Tbilisi and Moscow: An intergenerational standoff, with most of the persistent costs borne by Abkhaz and South Ossetians.

Fourth, while Georgia has been successful at convincing European and American diplomats to accept Georgia's de jure version of the map, it is not yet a member of the NATO alliance. This is because, from a certain point of view, even entertaining a conversation about admitting Georgia into NATO is a discussion about the degree to which NATO countries are willing to help Tbilisi "roll back" Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. To

interference by the presence of a Russian military garrison. Aslan Abashidze and his family accrued fantastic personal wealth as the lords of Adjara during the 1990s, occasionally lending his party's parliamentary votes to Shevardnadze's party in exchange for noninterference. See Derluguian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus*, 230–33; Kimberly Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 72–77. For a description of how Adjara rejoined the Georgian polity, see *ibid.*, 80–86.

¹⁷ King, "Benefits of Ethnic War."

¹⁸ Kevin O'Prey, "Keeping the Peace in the Borderlands of Russia," in *UN Peacekeeping, American Politics, and the Uncivil Wars of the 1990s*, ed. William J. Durch (Warsaw: Stimpson Center Press, 1996), 427.

understand why, consider the straightforward summary by Leeds: “Cooperative agreements with a low probability of being fulfilled are unlikely to be formed, and thus the likelihood of cooperation is driven both by the ability and willingness of states to assuage fears of opportunism and the ability and willingness of states to accept remaining risks.”¹⁹ Extending Western security guarantees to Georgia is a very problematic proposition within the European security community. For most Europeans, Georgia is many hundreds of kilometers from Europe proper. To the extent that non-Europeanness is a matter of geography, not of mindset, it will remain true no matter how proudly the Georgians fly the flag of the Council of Europe or celebrate their Christian heritage.²⁰ We will argue later in this essay that, following Brett Ashley Leeds’s logic, Georgian elites have been enormously successful at using a hypothetical European audience to convince voters to support many costly reforms in the service of transforming their state into something more recognizably Weberian—a more accountable, bureaucratically capable, and, ultimately, less-opportunistic Western ally. Despite this, because of Georgia’s location and its contested map, it is a security liability from the point of view of many in the West. NATO members like to imagine that NATO is a peace-seeking defensive alliance, but Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s contested status guarantees that when Westerners talk about “conflict resolution”

¹⁹ Brett Ashley Leeds, “Domestic Political Institutions, Credible Commitments, and International Cooperation,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 43, no. 4 (October 1999): 980.

²⁰ Like Turkey, Georgia is not anywhere close to the North Atlantic. A longitude line could be drawn through Georgia that touches Armenia, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. A liberal/constructivist rejoinder might be that the technological changes that govern the speed of information transmission are rendering the old geopolitics irrelevant.

Russians will respond by using the word “encirclement.”²¹ Because Russian troops have been stationed for decades on territory that many Georgians believe (and many Western governments act as if they believe) is sovereign Georgian territory, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty—which would require consultation by NATO members on the question of whether to go to war with Russia—would likely be invoked at some point (and it is reasonable to assume it would be invoked almost immediately). Since all sides understand this fact in the same way, if the NATO alliance were to expand into the South Caucasus it would be understood by many Russians as a Western attempt to provoke a war of choice.

Bargaining theory suggests that war (and preparation for war) can be understood as a costly signal of national resolve. James D. Fearon distinguishes between ex-ante signals of resolve, such as building up a military, and ex-post signals of resolve, such as escalating violent tactics and demonstrating an ability to absorb huge casualties once deterrence has already failed.²² But how do these insights help analysts understand the outbreak of the war? For one

²¹ Russian actions since 2008 are consistent with this because they station troops and conduct war exercises in both regions, recognize the regions as independent states, and most recently signed an agreement increasing integration between Russia and South Ossetia. See Olga Razumovskaya, “Pact Brings South Ossetia Closer to Russia,” *Wall Street Journal*, 18 March 2015, accessed 15 June 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-tightens-control-over-breakaway-georgian-region-of-south-ossetia-1426688743>.

²² James D. Fearon, “Signaling versus the Balance of Power and Interests,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 2 (June 1994): 236–69. Branislav L. Slantchev, “The Power to Hurt: Costly Conflict with Completely Informed States,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 123–33. He provides a model where, under complete information, war can occur with states attempting to both

thing, a costly signaling framework emphasizing demonstrations of resolve provides an answer to the puzzle of why a war might be rational from a Georgian perspective even though the Georgian military cannot possibly defeat their vastly stronger northern neighbor. States may be forced to signal resolve with costly military acts in order to get much of anything in international affairs. Georgia, located in the Caucasus mountain range between Chechnya and Turkey, is currently paying the costs associated with an attempt to exit Russia's sphere of influence.

We understand the rapid increase in Georgia's military power in the years prior to the August War is a signal of national seriousness. In the wake of the Rose Revolution of 2003, Georgia strengthened its ties with the United States, manifesting in a fifty-fold increase in its defense budget from 2002 to 2007.²³ After peacefully incorporating the unrecognized breakaway region of Adjara into Georgia through back-channel diplomacy in 2004, both the president and the citizens came to believe that a parallel reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were also possible—with Western assistance.²⁴ Georgian soldiers received material and training from the United States through the Georgian Train and Equip Program (GTEP) to prepare them to serve in the coalition of the willing in Iraq.²⁵ This buildup serves two obvious purposes. First, from the

impose costs on an opponent, as well as bear the brunt of an opponent attack. We believe this closely fits the case of Georgia and Russia, where there is little uncertainty of the final result of such a conflict.

²³ Georgia's defense budget was 18 million USD in 2002 and 780 million USD in 2007.

²⁴ Svante E. Cornell and S. Fredrick Starr, *Guns of August 2008: Russia's War with Georgia* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2009).

²⁵ This fact provides one explanation for this extreme budgetary discrepancy reported above: US weapons systems, purchased by Georgians with American military assistance, are quite expensive. And while the United States did not introduce kinetic assets into the region to assist the government in Tbilisi

perspective of Georgia, it is clearly a demonstration of willingness to fight hard after deterrence fails. Realistically, the most that the Georgian military could hope for is a series of tactical victories—such as bottlenecking Russian forces in a gorge—but Russians would have the ability to keep escalation dominance. Converting tactical gains into operational or strategic advantage without Western intervention is not likely, but building military forces with an ability to strike hard and fast, disrupting Russian war plans, and buying time for Western diplomats to raise the stakes and internationalize the conflict might have been the whole point. Second, and more obviously, purchasing weapons from the West signals an ability to rearm itself in a conflict with Russia. A reliance on Russian or former-Warsaw Pact member military hardware could lead to resupply problems for the Georgian army in an extended war.

In any case, if hard power is the currency of international politics, the Georgian military that fought in 2008 would have been unrecognizable to the coalition of militias that “lost Abkhazia” in 1994.²⁶ And from a certain perspective, all of this may be necessary: If Georgia

during the 2008 war, financial foreign policy instruments were brought to bear. The Office of the Vice President promised approximately 1 billion USD, floating the Georgian currency and preventing the collapse of the Tbilisi real-estate market.

²⁶ The frozen conflicts calcified against the backdrop of Georgian state failure, with militias improvising tactics and living off the land. Christoph Zurcher generously estimates the effective Georgian fighting force in 1992 at around six thousand men; see Zurcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 131. Edgar O’Ballance reports that earlier that year, when Shevardnadze declared his aspiration for a unified, centralized, conscripted Georgian army, he imagined a force structure containing thirteen thousand men; O’Ballance, *Wars in the Caucasus, 1990–1995* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 113. See

hopes to reclaim the secessionist territories, perhaps it must demonstrate an ability to raise the costs for Russia to keep troops permanently stationed in South Ossetian and Abkhaz territory. Perhaps the Kremlin must be reminded, in blood and treasure, that the Georgians care more about the particulars of territorial borders than the Russians do.

Where do the national interests of the United States fit into all of this? And if the answer is “not obviously anywhere,” then why is it so difficult for the United States to credibly commit to staying out of Russia’s backyard?²⁷ The United States has not entered into a formal alliance with Georgia but has sent a great deal of lethal and non-lethal aid to Georgia, trained extensively with the Georgian military, and encouraged Georgia to reform its domestic institutions (especially the army) in a way that would make it possible for them to join the Western security community in the future. To put the question in broader theoretical terms: How might a major power come to be a participant in conflicts where its national interests are not clearly implicated? There are at least three different classes of answers: alliance maintenance, issue slippage, and ideational affiliation. Each maps roughly onto one of the three “isms.”

William Wohlforth articulates a clear set of predictions for the United States foreign policy: alliances of convenience to check the ambitions of potential challengers.²⁸ Part of the

also Zurcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 137–43; Wheatley, *Georgia*, 67–73; Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States*, 68–70, 81, chap. 4.

²⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September–October 2014): 77–89. See also Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. 16–29, 162–78.

²⁸ William Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24, no. 1

hegemonic power's strategy to maintain its position ought to be to assemble coalitions of the willing to combat rising powers so that it does not have to bear all of the costs of fighting a challenger directly. Georgian foreign policy professionals clearly understand the possibility of a mutually beneficial exchange relationship in this regard. Measured in terms of troops per capita, Georgia sent more soldiers to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq than any other country—including the United States.²⁹ In exchange, through the GTEP program, the United States made sure that the troops fighting there were well armed and professionally trained.

A liberal narrative for how major powers might come to be involved in conflicts where their national interests are not implicated might be called “issue slippage”—or, as a realist might derisively phrase it, “bureaucratic decision-making within a consensus framework.” Great powers can sometimes become militarily involved in a particular theater for one reason at one time but then find they *sustain* the military involvement by a different logic entirely. These

(Summer 1999): 5–41. Nuno P. Monteiro presents a structural realist argument with similar logic but explicitly maps the conditions under which unipolarity “is likely to pit the unipole against recalcitrant minor powers.” See Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful,” *International Security* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2011/12): 9–40 (quotation, 21).

²⁹ Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Frederik Coene, “Go West: Georgia’s European Identity and Its Role in Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Objectives,” *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 6 (November 2014): 923–41, 934. Our interpretation of this trend is that participation in the Iraq war demonstrates a willingness to serve as frontline soldiers in state-building projects where Georgia has no national interests at stake, but the United States is acting as the lead state.

entangling dynamics are familiar to students of imperial history.³⁰ While NATO was initially created to deter the Soviet military from marching into Western Europe, over time it has evolved in the direction of a postmodern democracy club. And neoliberal analysis usefully draws attention to particular institutional design features of the NATO alliance—in particular its dual emphasis on consultation and consensus across all member states—that functionally limit the freedom of action for the most powerful member states. At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, months before the August War, member states of the NATO alliance issued a formal statement that they welcomed the Membership Action Plans of Georgia and Ukraine.³¹ Reaching consensus on the principles, and the exact language to express the principles, was years in the

³⁰ For a review of this literature, see Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 7–48. For an example relevant to the Georgian case consider the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, a “southern route” to extract Caspian Sea oil that bypasses Russian territory. The existence of this pipeline creates convergent economic and strategic logics for the West to care, perhaps a bit more than it otherwise might, about domestic outcomes in Georgia. The pipeline would not be there in the first place if Russia had had more influence over Georgia’s domestic political scene. Jordan Robertson and Michael Riley report that actors in Russia remotely sabotaged a portion of this pipeline in Turkey with timing that coincided with the August War; Robertson and Riley, “Mysterious ’08 Turkey Pipeline Blast Opened New Cyberwar Era,” *Bloomberg News*, 10 December 2014, accessed 15 February 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-12-10/mysterious-08-turkey-pipeline-blast-opened-new-cyberwar.html>.

³¹ Though the exact language does not formally link Georgia’s fate to Ukraine’s, nor commit NATO to accepting either state, Russian security practitioners could not possibly misinterpret the “when not if” message in Section 23.

drafting. So even if a broad consensus emerged among diplomats and foreign policy elites in the United States that changing course on the principles stated at Bucharest was desirable on balance (even taking into account the precedent of backing away from implied commitments), coordinating a shift in policies across the foreign ministries of every NATO member state to unmake the statement would be very costly. Bureaucratic processes sometimes take on characteristics of structures.

There is also an eclectic array of constructivist arguments that relate to ideas, language, shared memories, habituated understandings, and values. This set of arguments emphasizes that ideational concerns and a shared sense of identity often precede realist calculation. States do not always act with perfect rationality, or fully consider the universal choice-set, when their friends or fictive kin face an existential threat. What matters, then, in this world of ideas, are the boundaries of political communities. These boundaries are sculpted and maintained by political practice and are constantly under construction. Since the unit of analysis is often *ideas*, these arguments blur the boundaries between the first, second, and third images that motivate this article, so we will not dwell long upon them, except to notice that even the most committed third-image realist ought to admit that the Georgian political class has undertaken dramatic reforms to transform Georgia into a Western-European-style polity. Some of these performances are not easily faked. Political power rotates. Elections are carried off without the threat of violence. These outcomes are partially domestic institutional responses to the materialist positive incentives of EU association. But it is plausible that there is something independently attractive about Western-European cultural values to Georgians beyond material incentives in a way that is

not as true for Russians, Azeris, or Tajiks.³² Constructivist logics of appropriateness sit comfortably alongside realist logics of consequences to the extent that Russia is seen as an alien enemy or an autocratic kleptocracy:

The Western Alliance represents an institutionalization of the transatlantic security community based on common values and a collective identity of liberal democracies. The Soviet domestic structure and the values promoted by communism were regarded as alien to the community, resulting in a threat perception of the Soviet Union as the potential enemy. . . . If the democratization process in Russia gives way to authoritarian nationalism, however, liberal theorists do expect NATO to remain the dominant Western security institution and to regain its character as a defensive alliance. In this case, NATO would be expected quickly to extend its security guarantee to the new democracies in central Eastern Europe. . . . NATO also provides a unique institutional framework for Europeans to affect American policies. Liberal democracies successfully influence each other in the framework of international institutions by using norms and joint decision-making procedures as well as transnational politics. Playing by the rules of these institutions, they do not just constrain their own freedom of action; they also gain access to the decision-making process of their partners.³³

Georgia's cultivation of Western allies—its enviable ability to position itself in the imagination

³² The authors of this paper have observed that, as an empirical matter, both in Georgia and Ukraine, the more time a speaker devotes to developing these kinds of arguments the more common it is for speakers to retreat into the kinds of macro-historical arguments deployed in Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); or Keith Darden and Anna Gryzmala-Busse, "The Great Divide: Literacy, Nationalism, and the Communist Collapse," *World Politics* 59, no. 1 (October 2006): 83–115.

³³ Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Collective Identity in a Democratic Community: The Case of NATO," in *Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 395–96.

of liberal idealists in the West—may be as vital as any military asset.³⁴ At some risk of simplification, since the Rose Revolution optimists in Tbilisi have allowed themselves to imagine they would receive diplomatic, economic, and even military support from the West in a conflict with Russia.³⁵ Much of Georgia’s theatrical foreign policy—flying the European flag, celebrating pro-NATO policies, volunteering for the “Coalition of the Willing” in Iraq, advertising itself as a beacon of democracy in an autocratic region—is clearly aimed at widening the international audience for future conflicts beyond the South Caucasus in the hope that after a war Western states would insert themselves into the conflict. As third-party mediators, some sort of federal solution in which Western security guarantees for Abkhaz and South Ossetians supplemented Russian guarantees would be an outcome very favorable to Georgia.

Georgia’s best-case scenario is perfectly well understood inside the Kremlin. Georgia is regarded as a place for Russia to demonstrate resolve of its own more broadly and to push back

³⁴ To what extent domestic institutions in Georgia have been shaped—via processes of social coevolution or via a process of backwards-induction from the kind of society that would be most attractive as a NATO ally—is difficult to empirically assess. To put our cards on the table: We suspect that Georgia’s political evolution into something recognizably “European” has something to do with slow-moving, decentralized, and strategic processes of aspirational isomorphism—“acting into” the kind of state with which most Europeans might someday see themselves in solidarity. We hope to attempt to refine descriptions of these processes in later work.

³⁵ See Bruno Coppieters, “Locating Georgian Security,” in *Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution*, ed. Robert Legvold and Bruno Coppieters (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 339–88; Stephen Jones, *Georgia: A Political History since Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), esp. 265–66.

against Western meddling in its traditional sphere of influence. From many Russians' point of view, Western peacekeepers in the South Caucasus would be a humiliating precursor to NATO expansion into the region and an admission that Russia's sphere of influence is a thing of the past. Paying the costs of keeping Russian soldiers in the conflict regions communicates to Western audiences the seriousness of Russia's desire to avoid these outcomes. The decision by many Western governments to recognize Kosovo's independence in defiance of Russian preferences set the stage for Russia to deploy the language of "the Kosovo Precedent" in relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and to distribute passports to populations of both regions years prior to the 2008 conflict.³⁶ In a speech at the February 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy then-president Vladimir Putin stated: "I think 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

³⁶ These actions were universally recognized as a direct challenge to Georgia's claims to sovereignty. See Ellen Barry, "E.U. Report to Place Blame on Both Sides in Georgia War," *New York Times*, 28 September 2009, accessed 15 February 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/29/world/europe/29georgia.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0; "Statement by the NATO Secretary General on the so-called treaty between the Russian Federation and the South Ossetia region of Georgia," NATO, 18 March 2015, accessed 15 June 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_118280.htm. Many consider the entire ethno-national issue to be a cynical red herring and regard South Ossetia in particular as little more than a mafia-controlled criminal haven with ties to politically connected members of the Russian underworld. There is some evidence that, for some in the Kremlin, the territory is a useful site for money laundering and counterfeiting. Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 345.

trust.”³⁷

Viewed through Putin’s lens, staging a small war in August 2008 might have been a crude way of communicating to audiences in Brussels that the Bucharest declaration—that Georgia and Ukraine “will become members of NATO”—was a strategic error. The war served as a reminder just how easy it would be for NATO member states to find themselves in a multi-theater kinetic conflict with Russia over a forgettable flash point in the South Caucasus. After the war, to lock in its commitment even further, Russia formally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and urged other nations to follow suit (though only Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru did so). Formal defense treaties committing Russia to the defense of these states followed. Russian troops regularly stage war games in the disputed territories.

³⁷ Reasonable people disagree on whether this quote ought to be used as data for a “first image” logic or “third image” logic. For a “first image” logic, see, for instance, Michael McFaul, “Michael McFaul on Vladimir Putin and Russia,” 19 May 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHgp9fLUzpE>. For a “third image” logic, see, for instance, Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault.” For a “second-image logic” consider the overwhelming evidence that Putin speaks on behalf of *many* Russian voters when he says these sorts of things. According to a representative poll of Russians by the Levada Analytic Center in March of 2008, 36 percent of respondents thought that Georgia joining NATO would represent a serious threat to Russia, with another 28 percent saying it would create “some threat.” When asked about the root cause of the ongoing conflict in South Ossetia, the plurality of Russians, 49 percent, believe it is the result of “US Administration seeking to spread its influence over countries neighboring Russia.” Levada Analytical Center, “Russian Public Opinion 2009,” (2010), <http://www.levada.ru/sites/en.d7154.agava.net/files/Levada2009Eng.pdf>.

HUMAN AGENCY AND THE AUGUST 2008 WAR

A salient characteristic shared by both Georgia and Russia in 2008 was an extreme concentration of power in the office of the executive.³⁸ This includes an ability of the president to choose the timing of foreign policy moves, making public statements on television to voters calibrated to raise public awareness of the crisis and maximize the state's bargaining position.³⁹ If one is inclined to the popular wisdom that neither the Russian nor Georgian head of state was meaningfully constrained by legislatures, or any institutionalized checks or balances, first-image considerations become especially important. But this, in turn, requires considering biographical details of individual lives. Who were the heads of state, and what was their role in this crisis?

The first individual who must be acknowledged as sowing the seeds of the Georgia-Russia war is Eduard Shevardnadze, who was both the architect of the peaceful end of the Cold War and the architect of Georgia's unusually independent foreign policy. It is no secret why Shevardnadze was selected by a coalition of Georgian warlords as a figurehead president in the early 1990s. He represented a unique national asset for a state confronted with a bewildering set of challenges. In the West, the recently retired Soviet foreign minister was probably the

³⁸ Henry Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³⁹ Extending the logic of Schelling in *Arms and Influence*, James D. Fearon, popularized the notion of domestic audience costs: the idea that leaders of democracies and non-democracies may behave systematically different in crisis-bargaining situations because the former can put themselves at risk of losing office by "going public" with the crisis. See Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 577–92.

second most popular Soviet politician (after Mikhail Gorbachev) and the second most famous Georgian in history (after Josef Stalin). His personal friendships with foreign leaders and dignitaries—especially Bill Clinton and James Baker—were critical for getting international recognition of Georgia with territorial boundaries defined to include the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁴⁰ To assist the great man, multilateral and bilateral aid flowed in from many actors in the international system.⁴¹ Shevardnadze understood that the West wanted a geopolitical foothold in the Caucasus and that he was considered a “known quantity” in a

⁴⁰ He was the first president from the Caucasus or Central Asia invited to visit the White House, and on his visit, Clinton promised 70 million USD in bilateral aid and signed policy directives for the CIA to train and equip a special unit of bodyguards to protect the new Georgian president. See Irakly Areshidze, *Democracy and Autocracy in Eurasia: Georgia in Transition* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 36; O’Ballance, *Wars in the Caucasus, 1990–1995*, 138–39.

⁴¹ If success is measured in pure material terms, Shevardnadze proved successful in this task beyond anyone’s expectations. On a per capita basis, Georgia received more democracy promotion assistance from the United States than the rest of the Former Soviet Union combined. From Western European states, Georgia received approximately 172 million USD per year during the Shevardnadze era. From 1995 to 2000, over 700 million USD of bilateral aid arrived from the United States. In the year 2000, USAID’s budget amounted to 200 USD per Georgian citizen—compared to merely 1.25 USD per Russian. In addition to being the fourth-largest per capita recipient of USAID in 2002–3, Georgia also received some 400 million Euro in the decade before the Rose Revolution from the coffers of the European Union, with additional contributions from many individual member states. Theodor Tudoroiu, “Rose, Orange, and Tulip: The Failed Post-Soviet Revolutions,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40, no. 3 (September 2007): 323. See also Stephen Jones, “The Rose Revolution: A Revolution without Revolutionaries?” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19, no. 1 (March 2006): 41–42.

confusing and chaotic region. Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia noted that his unique skills and autonomy in foreign affairs were the foundation of his domestic legitimacy: “It was on the image of this indispensability that he started building his internal legitimacy—and was later able to translate this into real power.”⁴²

One of the effects of Shevardnadze’s celebrity status was that events in the periphery of the South Caucasus played out in a way that was more “public” than would have been the case otherwise.⁴³ Shevardnadze’s foot dragging on joining the CIS and quick expansion of ties to Western European states was seen as a provocation to Moscow. He did, in the end, opt to join the Commonwealth of Independent States in December of 1993, and in the mid-1990s there was a general sense that the “frozen conflicts,” which had left unrecognized states in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adjara, would be reincorporated into the Georgian territory after patient diplomatic negotiations.⁴⁴ But as it became progressively clearer that Shevardnadze was not a disposable

⁴² See Ghia Nodia, “Putting the State Back Together in Post-Soviet Georgia,” in *Beyond State Crisis?: Post-Colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Mark R. Beissinger and Crawford Young (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2002), 428.

⁴³ This publicity was not an unqualified asset, since it also raised the stakes for Moscow. When Shevardnadze declined Russia’s offer to have Georgia join the Commonwealth of Independent States—claiming to be simply executing the will of Georgia’s consensus governing body—the challenge was understood immediately in Moscow.

⁴⁴ Two prominent area experts who opined that this was likely were Ronald Grigor Suny, “Elite Transformation in Late-Soviet and Post-Soviet Transcaucasia, or What Happens when the Ruling Class Can’t Rule?” in *Patterns in Post-Soviet Leadership*, ed. Robert C. Tucker and Timothy J. Colton (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); David D. Laitin, “Secessionist Rebellion in the Former Soviet Union,” *Comparative Political Studies* 34, no. 8 (October 2001): 839–61.

figure in the Georgian political scene and that he had aspirations—and tangible plans—to move Georgia out of Russia's sphere, the Kremlin's position hardened.

Shevardnadze acceded to the presence of Russian peacekeepers along the unrecognized border with Abkhazia, the deployment of Russian border guards along the Turkish border, allowing Russian soldiers to temporarily encircle Georgia. And he personally negotiated—but, in the end, did not sign—a treaty on Russian military bases on the territory of the Republic of Georgia, which would have granted Russia's military basing rights in Georgia for twenty-five years.⁴⁵ Shevardnadze was the only post-Soviet leader with the gravitas to spend weeks negotiating a treaty of this kind, shake hands with all invited diplomats, and then just walk out of the room without signing anything. This is one of many outcomes from this chaotic period that, from a distance, seems over-determined by slow-moving macro-historical structures, but, on closer inspection, is clearly the contingent result of just a few people making choices in a room.

Peaceful protests swept Shevardnadze and his regime from power in November 2003—a set of events that have come to be known as the Rose Revolution.⁴⁶ In the years after the

⁴⁵ See Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States*, 136–37; Robert L. Larsson, “The Enemy Within: Russia's Military Withdrawal from Georgia,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 3 (July 2004): 406–9.

⁴⁶ For a comprehensive and responsible review of the structural and political conditions that created the Rose Revolution, see Wheatley, *Georgia*, esp. chaps. 6–7. See also Charles Fairbanks, “Georgia's Rose Revolution,” *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (April 2004): 110–24; Charles King, “A Rose among Thorns: Georgia Makes Good,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 2 (March–April 2004): 13–18; Lincoln Mitchell, “Georgia's Rose Revolution,” *Current History* 103, no. 675 (October 2004): 342–48; Eric Miller, “Smelling the Roses: Eduard Shevardnadze's End and Georgia's Future,” *Problems of*

revolution, the energetic young president, Mikheil Saakashvili, took over the highly centralized state apparatus and hegemonic party structure that Shevardnadze had built. The new president rode the nationalist euphoria to make a few institutional changes that earned him credentials as a reformer—notably firing the entire “traffic police” (making it possible for citizens to drive the streets of Tbilisi without constantly stopping to pay bribes) and dramatically simplified the tax code. But he did not give up on Shevardnadze’s map. Buoyed early on by success in Adjara, Saakashvili invested his political capital into the legacy project of reincorporating the breakaway regions.

The simplest historiographical shortcut to political reconciliation with Russia is for future Georgian elites to lay all blame for the war at the feet of Saakashvili. Many Georgians and Russians already distill the many complex events described in this paper with the shorthand “Saakashvili’s War.” Saakashvili is often depicted as mentally unhinged in the Russian press.⁴⁷

Post-Communism 51, no. 2 (March–April 2004); Jones, “The Rose Revolution”; Vladimir Papava, “The Political Economy of Georgia’s Rose Revolution,” *East European Democratization* 50, no. 4 (Autumn 2006): 657–67.

⁴⁷ For example, see “Saakashvili Is Eating His Tie in Front of Cameras,” *Vzglyat*, 16 August 2008, accessed 15 February 2015, <http://www.vz.ru/news/2008/8/16/197332.html>; “Salome Zurbishvili: ‘Saakashvili is insane,’” *Echo of Moscow*, 13 May 2009, accessed 15 February 2015, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/inopress/591805-echo.html>; “Saakashvili is Packing his Stuff and Leaving the President’s Office,” *First Channel*, 27 October 2013, accessed 15 February 2015, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/world/244869>. More recently, see *Russia Today*’s coverage of Saakashvili’s appointment as mayor of Odessa: “Ex-Georgian President, Wanted at Home, Becomes Governor in Ukraine,” *Russia Today*, 30 May 2015, accessed 15 June 2015, <http://rt.com/news/263493-saakashvili-governor-odessa-ukraine/>.

During his presidency, he was fond of comparing himself to Georgia's legendary "King David the Builder," and his domestic popularity was buoyed by nationalist calls for reunifying his state. He is blamed by opponents (some would say unfairly) for a number of decisions that escalated the crisis; the Tagliavini report confirms the well-known fact (seized upon by Russians) that the Georgian government of Mikheil Saakashvili "fired the first shot."⁴⁸ The report goes on to detail Russia's multiple violations of international law at every stage of the conflict, a different president might have responded to the same Russian provocations differently. Saakashvili will likely go to his grave claiming that he was executing Georgian popular will. The positions his state took in the heat of the crisis were telegraphed from Tbilisi years in advance through numerous speeches, party manifestos, and proclamations.

On the Russian side, the August War represented the first use of military force for President Dmitry Medvedev. On 8 August, he went public on the crisis by announcing on state media, "I must protect the life and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are."⁴⁹ Putin lent a personal touch to the crisis, leaving the Beijing Olympic Games to fly back to Russia. In the wake of the 2014 Ukraine events, dozens of analysts have revisited the events of Georgia's war in the service of a master-narrative that lays the blame entirely on Putin.⁵⁰

The other first-image actors relevant to the timing of the August War are Americans:

⁴⁸ For the Tagliavini report, see Heidi Tagliavini et al., "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," vol. 1, September 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30_09_09_iiffmgc_report.pdf, esp. 18–29.

⁴⁹ Official Kremlin Statement, August 8, 2008.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Kimberly Marten, "Informal Political Networks and Putin's Foreign Policy: The Examples of Iran and Syria," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 71–87, esp. 75.

President George W. Bush and presidential hopeful John McCain. Bush had made a personal visit to Georgia, and Saakashvili was probably right to calculate that however low the probability of a robust US military response to Russia, it would be lower if the Bush administration was displaced by a Democratic administration. Fluent in English and holding a graduate degree from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs program, Saakashvili was a talented multilingual amanuensis for the Georgian national position in the English-language twenty-four-hour news cycle.⁵¹ McCain's decision to seize on events in Georgia to generate campaign talking points was a relevant signal to Russia that the war was having ripple effects in American domestic politics. But the decision to escalate the conflict with Russia, rather than capitulate to Russian aggression, was a gamble by Saakashvili based on a motivated misperception: the presumption that the United States and NATO would consider intervention to bail his small state out.⁵²

THE SECOND IMAGE REVERSED AND THE AUGUST WAR

Georgia is a rare contemporary case of a democratic polity with insecure borders facing an existential security threat. A close examination of the process by which Georgia and Russia found themselves at war in August 2008 suggests an important role for unit-level characteristics

⁵¹ Charles King reports "[Saakashvili] hit every major talking point meaningful to Western audiences, including claims of ethnic cleansing and genocide—and the bizarre allegation that Russia was plotting to start forest fires." See King, "The Five-Day War: Managing Moscow after the Georgia Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 6 (November–December 2008): 8.

⁵² Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 356–71.

of the Georgian polity: not only that there was quite broad and deep support for territorial revisionism among voters, but also that Georgians were—and still are—unusually entrepreneurial about altering domestic institutions to suit the preferences of outside powers. In this section, we will present a variety of evidence in support of both propositions. Georgian politicians and voters imagined themselves to be pivot-players in a bargaining game between Russia and the West in 2008, and Georgian elites altered their state institutions in the years after the Rose Revolution in order to maximize the probability of Western military and diplomatic intervention to tip the balance.

Political culture and national values are difficult to measure.⁵³ Objective social indicators, however, suggest Georgia has a strong claim to be the most “Pro-West” society in all of Southwest Asia. Western Europe exerts a powerful emotional pull on a wide stratum of Georgian society. US and European leaders cannot credibly commit to ceasing the economic and cultural production activities that make the West an attractive model to the next generation of Georgians. Hitching one’s life opportunities to the English-language speaking parts of Europe is a strong lure.⁵⁴ So even if Western leaders could somehow credibly commit to not extend security guarantees to states in the South Caucasus, Georgians’ drift toward the West might

⁵³ Many of the conceptual difficulties stem from the fact that diplomatic professionals often invoke shared culture or complimentary national values as a rhetorical strategy to omit reference to power or geopolitics, rather than as independent variables that can be used in a predictive manner to make informed bets about probable alliance behavior, even controlling for power and geopolitics.

⁵⁴ For evidence that the English language has surpassed Russian in the linguistic status hierarchy in Tbilisi, see Jesse Driscoll, Christopher Berglund, and Timothy Blauvelt, “Language Hierarchies in Georgia: An Experimental Approach,” *Caucasus Survey* 4, no. 1 (January 2016): 44–62.

continue. Broad social support exists for structural reforms to move the country toward democracy and the rule of law, away from the Soviet past. Many Georgian politicians claim to believe that NATO and EU membership are just over the horizon, and these beliefs are echoed across society.⁵⁵

Georgia is one of the best-functioning democracies in its neighborhood. The mass opinions of voters clearly shape Georgian leaders' behavior. Indeed, Georgia is probably the best Eurasian example of a country where democracy promotion activities by the United States and Western Europe can be said to have "worked."⁵⁶ Georgia is not a very good example of what David Lake was thinking of when he famously described democracies as "powerful pacifists" (not by any definition of either word).⁵⁷ As a relatively tiny state emerging from decades of authoritarian governance, Georgia in 2008 is more accurately an exemplar of a relatively

⁵⁵ See Ó Beacháin and Coene, "Go West," esp. 935.

⁵⁶ With 55 percent of discretionary spending in the 2003 state budget filled by Western donors and a constant stream of rhetorical commitments to democratization, Shevardnadze could not easily interfere with the actions of foreign democracy-promotion NGOs in his own country. Georgian citizens themselves, taking their president at his word when he invoked the promises of democracy and legitimacy, were ultimately unwilling to tolerate the regime's manipulation of elections in 2003. Civil society groups found themselves aided substantially by foreign-funded NGOs, including active participation by embassy employees and American and European expatriates. The gridlocked police apparatus did not respond to orders to dismiss crowds of demonstrators. The historical record on this point remains muddled, but the bulk of the evidence supports Fairbanks' account that Shevardnadze gave orders to disperse the demonstrators that were not carried out. See Fairbanks, "Georgia's Rose Revolution," 117.

⁵⁷ David Lake, "Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 1 (March 1992): 24–37.

noninstitutionalized, populist, post-revolutionary democracy—exactly the sort of government that may be the greatest threat to be involved in interstate conflicts.⁵⁸ After the Rose Revolution of November 2003 swept Saakashvili into power, Georgia was included in prominent lists of “democracies with adjectives,” and by 2008 it was considered an exemplar “electoral authoritarian” or “hybrid” regime by political scientists. In 2008 Freedom House, National Democratic Institute (NDI), and other democracy-promotion NGOs assessed Georgia as the most promising candidate for democratic consolidation in the South Caucasus or Central Asia, even though there was no local alternative that could compete with the immense incumbency advantages of Saakashvili.⁵⁹

But four years after the war, when his United National Movement (UNM) party was unexpectedly defeated at the ballot box in 2012, Saakashvili conceded the loss and stepped down from power. So even if this is only clear in retrospect, elections do actually matter in Georgia. Voter preferences do inform and constrain leaders’ behavior. Though the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had no ability (or ambition) to seize the capital of Tbilisi, they remained

⁵⁸ See Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton 2000), esp. 36–39, 59–66. The basic argument is that these electoral pressures may increase incentives for elites to politicize historical grievances, escalate international disputes, and ride the wave of nationalism. The theoretical prediction matches Georgia’s empirical record closely. See Edward D. Mansfield and Jack L. Snyder, “Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength, and War,” *International Organization* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 297–337.

⁵⁹ Jesse Driscoll and Daniel Hidalgo, “Intended and Unintended Consequences of Democracy Promotion Assistance to Georgia after the Rose Revolution,” *Research and Politics* 1, no. 1 (April–June 2014): 1–13.

territorial outposts for Russians through most of the 1990s. More importantly, they were lightning rods for Georgian nationalists who fed off the anger of the displaced refugees who had been ethnically cleansed from the conflict zones. The distinctly militant and anti-Russian flavor of revolutionary nationalism in postindependence Georgia, and the aspirations of the displaced ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia to return home eventually, have constrained the ability of Georgian leaders to reach a compromise.⁶⁰

It is not a secret that Georgian institutions have reformed in order to demonstrate a willingness to participate as a full member in European security dialogues. The reform process has been lubricated with large inflows of foreign assistance since the Shevardnadze era. There have been tangible achievements. Bureaucratic professionalism in Georgia has improved dramatically compared to much of the rest of post-Soviet Eurasia. The Foreign Ministry, and the English-language speaking foreign relations wing of Georgia's military, both maintain cadres that are extremely capable and impressive. Their diplomats present Georgia as an aspirational, but fully functioning member of the European community of liberal nations. They emphasize that Georgians share a religion (Christianity, contra Turkey) and a political system (real democracy, contra Russia) with Western Europeans. The network of informal connections and friendly understandings stretching from embassies in Tbilisi through Brussels to Washington D.C. is clearly one of Georgia's great assets in international relations. This network had

⁶⁰ See Stephen F. Jones, "Adventurers or Commanders? Civil-Military Relations in Georgia Since Independence," in *Civil-Military Relations in the Soviet and Yugoslav Successor States*, ed. Daniel Zisker and Constantine P. Danopoulos (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Stephen Jones, "Georgia: The Trauma of Statehood," in *New States, New Politics: Building Post-Soviet Nations*, ed. Ian Bremmer and Ian Taras (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

tangible effects on the 2008 crisis. To return briefly to the first-image analysis from above, the Saakashvili government somehow managing to position Georgia favorably in John McCain's imagination had important implications for the way that the Russo-Georgia conflict was portrayed in the English-language twenty-four-hour news cycle. Favorable English-language coverage bolstered Saakashvili's domestic image at a critical time, reinforcing Saakashvili's bargaining position in the conflict.

The Rose Revolution had the effect of rehabilitating the regime in the imaginations of many Western defense analysts, who rediscovered their optimism for America's role in the South Caucasus and doubled down on their aid packages. Georgian nationalists validated this optimism with a series of political victories. Shortly after the change in government, the breakaway republic of Adjara was peacefully reincorporated into Georgia proper.⁶¹ Many Georgians wanted to press onward, gambling that friendly relations with America would be instrumentally useful in achieving their goals. In a nationally representative survey conducted after the 2008 war, an overwhelming majority of Georgian citizens prioritized reclaiming control of the lost territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia over all other political issues, including good relations with Russia (prioritized by only 9.3 percent of respondents) or the West (prioritized by only 7.1 percent), illustrated in Figure 3. The majority of the Georgian foreign policy establishment favors forging close military and diplomatic relations with the West, with ascension to NATO (and eventually the EU) as achievable foreign policy aspirations. Over two-thirds of survey respondents reported believing that if Georgia was a member of the NATO, it would have deterred Russian involvement; 61 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "Good

⁶¹ For details, see Marten, *Warlords*, 77–86.

relations with the West or Russia are just a means to that end, and once we have the territories back it will be possible to choose our own way. If I had the choice, I would never abandon the dream of national reunification.”

These survey trends are indirect evidence that Saakashvili delivered Georgians a war they wanted. At the very least the trends suggest that a belligerent bargaining posture won Saakashvili higher levels of popularity than he might have received if he had been willing to compromise on nationalist maximalist positions. Respondents were asked whether or not they would support a hypothetical future presidential candidate who would redraw the national boundaries to allow the territories to secede in order to more aggressively and realistically pursue NATO membership. Only 4.6 percent said they would definitely vote for that candidate, with 13.5 percent more saying they would consider voting for him—leaving more than 80 percent of respondents shaking their heads.⁶²

⁶² The exact question wording read: “Let’s say a new political party forms sometime between now and the next presidential election. The candidate is intelligent and charismatic, and claims that he will do his best to implement all of the same policies as this administration in every way, except that he will seek to formally re-draw the borders of Georgia to allow the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to secede, so that he can more aggressively pursue NATO membership to secure Georgia. If you thought he could win, would you consider voting for this new candidate?” A separate sample was asked about a candidate who took a more diplomatic approach to solving the crisis with Russia and the territories. That hypothetical candidate fared a bit better, with 6.7 percent definitely and 16.3 percent considering voting for him.

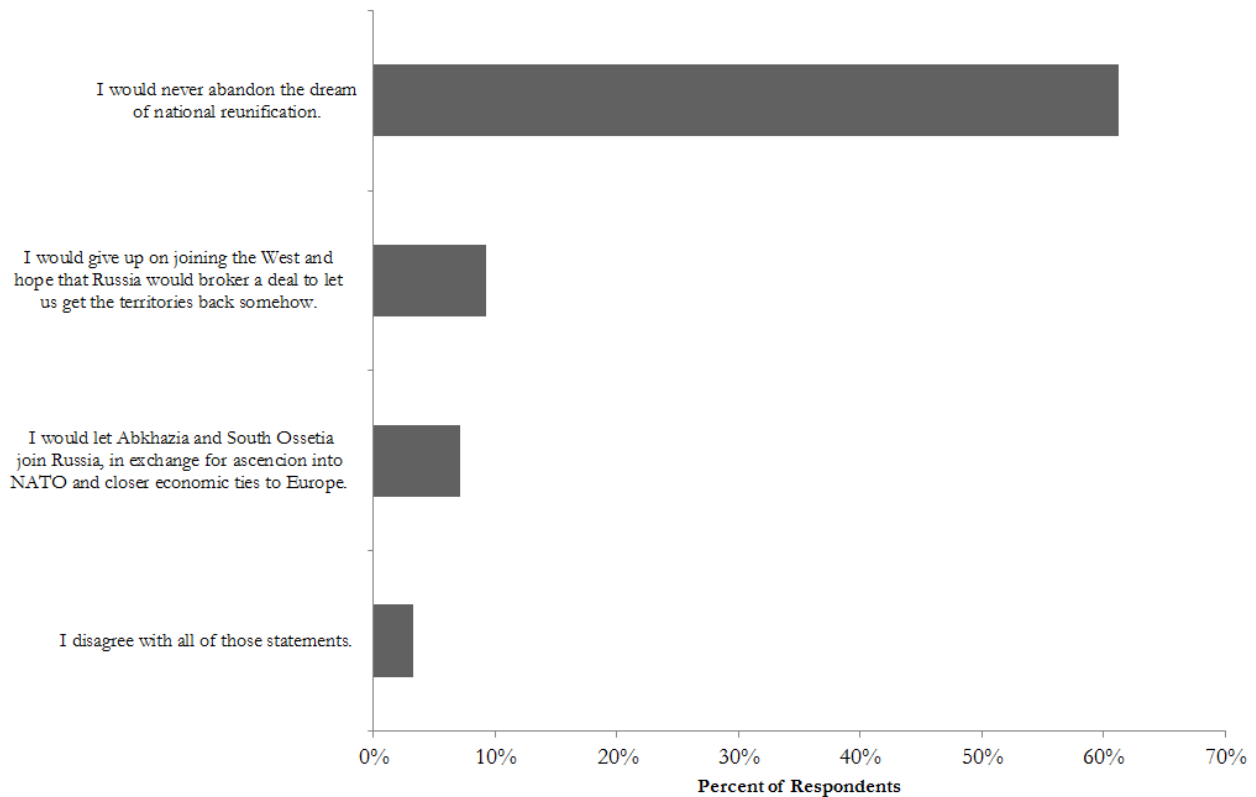


FIGURE 3 What Georgians say they want (and don't), part II

It is the official position of the Georgian government that reintegrating Abkhazia would come only with provisions of autonomy. Given Georgian public opinion on minority issues, the Abkhaz in particular can be perhaps forgiven for being skeptical of claims that they would be treated magnanimously by Georgians if the frozen conflict were resolved in Georgia's favor. When Georgian citizens were asked a variety of questions related to the practical meaning of "autonomy" for the Abkhaz, 71 percent of respondents believed that "Georgians should be able to purchase whatever property they want regardless of the wishes of the provisional Abkhaz government," 61 percent of respondents believed "Abkhaz and South Ossetians should be denied the right to serve in the Georgian military, police, or border guards," and 78 percent of respondents believed "schools and universities in Abkhazia should not be allowed to teach

classes in only Russian or Abkhaz.” Two generations of Georgian politicians promised that ties with the West would help the Georgians reclaim territory. Many respondents on the survey willingly admitted that they saw ties between Georgia and the West as a means to an end.

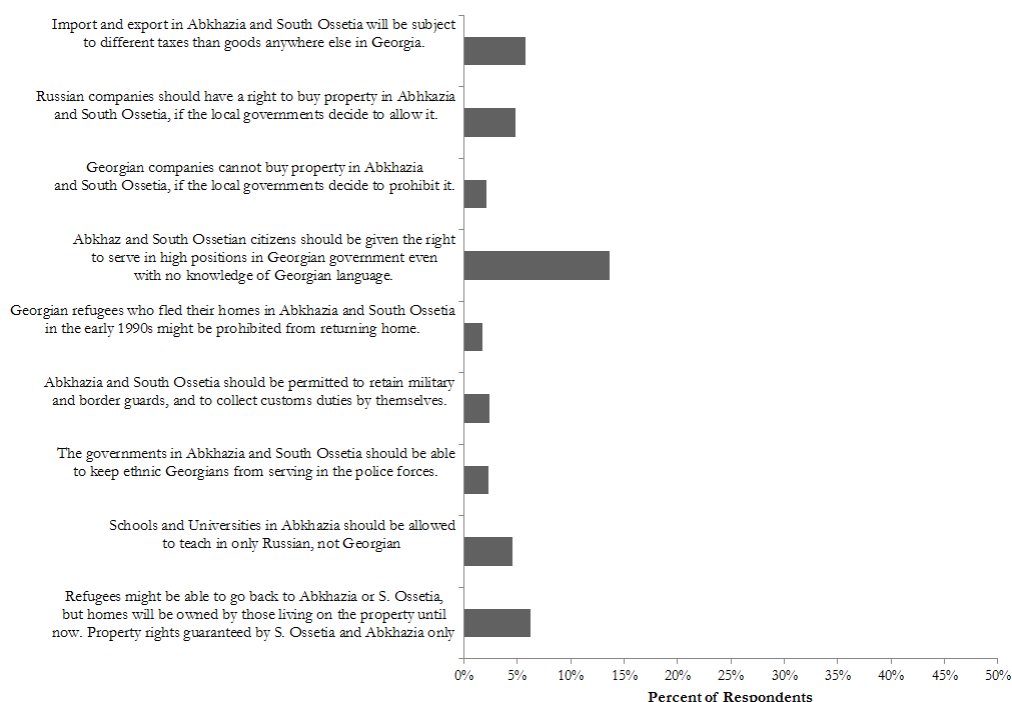


FIGURE 4 What Georgians say they want (and don't), part III

There are also second-image characteristics of the Russian state in 2008 that are relevant to the outbreak of war. Specialists disagree on whether Russia ought to be considered a new democracy, electoral autocracy, or just an old-fashioned dictatorship that is savvy about using new media, but there is broad agreement that the party in power in Russia inherits centuries of autocratic imperial history. It has security interests that span Eurasia. And while few Western observers describe Russia's role in the South Caucasus as a neutral, third-party mediator between Georgians, Abkhaz, and South Ossetians, many Russian citizens clearly understand Russia's

military presence in Georgia in exactly this way. At some risk of cultural stereotyping, most Russians see themselves in the role of big brother in the Caucasus, keeping the peace between unruly mountain peoples that have always hated each other. This allows Russians to script themselves as heroic defenders who guarantee the ability of peaceful minorities to live in their indigenous homeland against the tide of genocidal Georgians who are backed by hypocritical Western governments.⁶³ Medvedev's military intervention in Georgia was very popular in Russia.⁶⁴ This is at least partly due to what Snyder has identified as "partially free" media.⁶⁵ Both states enjoy influence over large private and public media relations bureaucracies. As the conflict unfolded, the story that emerged was initially tilted toward the Kremlin's point of view, in large part because Russian reporters—many of whom were pre-positioned in South Ossetia—were the only ones who could access the conflict zones. But as elites in both states responded to the others' provocations, they used the opportunity to field-test emergent-information warfare technologies (in addition to familiar high-production-value video imagery and "expert analysis" from patriotic commentators). It is worth quoting Robert J. Diebert, Rafal Rohozinski, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata at length:

⁶³ During the 2008 crisis, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated on multiple occasions that villages in South Ossetia were being ethnically cleansed. See "Russian Tanks Enter South Ossetia," *BBC*, 8 August 2008, accessed 15 February 2015, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7548715.stm>.

⁶⁴ Yuri Levada Analytical Center, Russian Public Opinion, 4 August 2009, <http://www.levada.ru/old/press/2009080401.html>.

⁶⁵ The argument that a partial-monopoly on state media can be used to shape public opinion in a violent nationalist mold seems like a good fit for both the Georgian and Russian experiences around the August War. See Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, 59–66.

Civilian leadership on both sides clearly appreciated the importance of strategic communication, and targeted domestic and international media in order to narrate the intent and desired outcome of the conflict. . . . [In Russia] strategic communications were synchronized across the Russian Ministry of Defense, the president's office, and associated news media. There are strong indications that a communications plan was also extended into new media, with political groups aligned with the government mobilized in an effort to use blogs, news sites, and other resources . . . The government-sponsored English-language channel RT carried 24-hour coverage of the conflict, including footage purported to be from the zone of operations. The Russian message portrayed the operation as a peacekeeping mission in response to "Georgian aggression against Russian peacekeepers and the civilian population in South Ossetia." The narrative claimed that Russia was attempting to prevent a humanitarian crisis and was protecting the lives of Russian citizens in accordance with Russian legislation. . . . Georgia's information campaign hinged upon strategic communication orchestrated through the president's office and oriented toward international media. . . . The Georgian message was that Georgia had reacted out of necessity following attacks on Georgian villages by South Ossetian forces, and that it was resisting disproportionate Russian aggression.⁶⁶

Events of the August 2008 war were recorded for the benefit of Russian domestic constituencies. There are huge "beached" Russian-speakers living in territories that used to be the Soviet Union: in the Baltics, Central Asia, and in Eastern Europe. Many of these citizens watch, enjoy, and trust the Russian news cycle, and certainly see themselves more in solidarity with the Abkhaz and South Ossetians than with Georgians.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ronald J. Diebert, Rafal Rohozinski, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, "Cyclones in Cyberspace: Information Shaping and Denial in the 2008 Russia-Georgia War," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 1 (February 2012): 3–24.

⁶⁷ Of particular interest at the time of this writing is the reaction of Ukrainian leaders to the 2008 war. The East-West schism manifested in familiar and predictable ways. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, representing the government of President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, called on Russia to pull troops out of Georgia and recognize Georgian territorial integrity. Viktor Yanukovich, who had recently lost the repeated second-round election supported Russia, which is

ALLIANCE CREDIBILITY OR CHAIN GANGING?

This article suggests that an implicit alliance relationship between certain members of the American and Georgian political elite is not new. At the level of personality politics and acculturation—the kinds of things that many constructivist scholars believe are underemphasized in security discourses—gradual alignment between Georgia and the West has been ongoing since the Shevardnadze era. Georgia has not been successful at securing formal Western security guarantees. But its domestic politics have evolved to maximize the probability of Western security assistance in the event of a war with Russia. In our view, firing first in the August 2008 war was a risky gamble, to be sure, but it was not crazy, or irrational, for Saakashvili to believe that the West might come to his country's aid.

unsurprising since his Party of Regions had signed an agreement to collaborate with Putin's own United Russia party. The Crimean parliament even voted to recognize the newly independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia, urging the national government to do the same. In 2009, when joint military exercises were to take place with Ukrainian and NATO forces, it was the Party of Regions and Russian nationalists who protested to disrupt the maneuvers. See "Ukraine Calls on Russia to Pull Out Its Troops from Georgia," *UNIAN*, 8 August 2008, accessed 15 February 2015,

<http://www.unian.info/society/136250-ukraine-calls-on-russia-to-pull-out-its-troops-from-georgia.html>;

Taras Kuzio, "Yanukovich's Election Opens Up Crimean Separatist Threat," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7, no. 41 (March 2010). Mikheil Saakashvili's decision to involve himself directly in Ukrainian politics in the 2014–15 period fit neatly into the *Pervy Kanal* (*Channel One*) narrative.

There is cause for worry that certain aspects of Georgia's past may be repeated in Ukraine's future. In response to revolutionary regime change in 2014, unrecognized statelets seem to be forming in the Eastern Donbas region under the aegis of Russian protection. A Western-oriented political coalition has consolidated power in Kyiv. A fear is that Eastern Ukraine is where many forces on both sides have already decided they will go to fight to hold the line. To return to the argument at the beginning of this paper, what makes offensive alliances more likely to incite conflict is the expectation of increased likelihood of success when an alliance partner's strength is brought to bear. The hard truth is that, at the present time, Western policy professionals use the words "conflict resolution and capacity building" to describe the behaviors that Russian policy professionals describe as "encirclement." Though many in the West dismiss Russia's fears of encirclement as cynical fabrications, extending NATO security guarantees to Ukraine would probably be the end of "strategic depth" from the point of view of Moscow. Russians have been articulating this point in plain speech for decades and are very frustrated to have been persistently ignored. The provocation represented by a discussion of expanding security guarantees to Ukraine is more antagonistic to Russia than the conversation about expansion to Georgia, if only because Georgia is so far away from Russia's urban power centers. No Russian military planner seriously thinks that Georgia is going to tip the strategic balance between Russia and the West, but every Russian military planner would worry about having NATO precision-guided missiles and artillery in Eastern Ukraine. To block this outcome, the Kremlin's strategy seems to be creating more "frozen" conflicts—in Crimea, and perhaps elsewhere. The tone and tenor of the conversations about NATO expansion in the capital cities of alliance member states are quite different in 2015 than they were at the Bucharest Summit of 2008. Everyone has been reminded just how serious a game is being played and how high the

stakes actually are.

The data presented in this paper demonstrates that the aspiration of attaining Western security guarantees has shaped Georgian domestic politics. The desire to draw the United States into the South Caucasus in a military capacity served as a focal point for Georgian elites after the Rose Revolution, allowing these elites to solve a coordination problem among themselves. Perhaps, in a more multipolar world, these coordination problems would have gridlocked Georgian politics or allowed for a more far-reaching and public consideration of the foreign policy choice set. But since this did not come to pass, there is an entire generation of Georgians poised to feel a sense of angry resentment at being abandoned by the United States and the West.⁶⁸ Most of those Georgians, if they were to read this essay, would probably consider the authors “useful idiots,” schilling for Russia pro bono.

In terms of grand strategy, the policy implication of our analysis is straightforward. The risk of another Saakashvili-like leader in Georgia, or an analogous populist in Ukraine, is something that ought to be taken very seriously. We have provided evidence of a strong domestic political logic within the Georgian polity that rewards leaders who stand up to Russia. We have also provided evidence that voters understand, and reward, attempts to draw the NATO alliance into a direct conflict with Russia – to internationalize the conflict and, ultimately, get a better bargain. In this context, chain-ganging is a possibility that must be carefully weighted against

⁶⁸ This need not have anything to do with polarity. Whether or not the world is truly unipolar at the time of this writing, and whether or not unipolarity is an analytically useful concept, the United States spends much more on its military than any plausible coalition of competitors and has a clear comparative advantage in air power. This was even more true in the 1990s and 2000s, the period in which the Georgian polity we describe institutionalized its foreign policy goals.

the benefits of providing security guarantees to Georgia and Ukraine through NATO.

The authors thank Hans Gutbrod and Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for collecting and then making available their survey data. We also acknowledge the tremendous contributions of interviewer and data entry teams. We received useful feedback and assistance from Timothy Blauvelt, Erik Gartzke, Stephen Hanson, Susan Peterson, Randall Schweller, and the anonymous reviewers for *Security Studies*. Carolyn De Roster and Brittany Parowski provided valuable research assistance.