

# Russian Grand Strategy in the South Ossetia War

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**Abstract:** The 2008 Russia–Georgia War over South Ossetia and Abkhazia sparked controversy about whether Russia’s grand strategic intentions in the South Caucasus were expansive *vis-à-vis* Moscow’s perceived sphere of interest. This is often based on the assumption that Russia initiated the war with—among other objectives—the intention of regime change in Tbilisi. This article examines Russian decision-making and the course of events leading up to the war through various explanatory models. It concludes that, because the Russian military and civilian leadership in Moscow—namely, that of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev—was disjointed and lacking significant unity of effort, the war itself served as little evidence of a grand strategic shift on Moscow’s part. Decision-making by civilians can be explained by a pragmatic response to the unfolding of events, either by Georgia or by Russian military brinkmanship.

**Keywords:** Georgia, Kremlin, Russia, South Ossetia

**L**ittle debate remains as to the outcome of the Russia–Georgia War of August 2008: in the span of five days, the Russian military defeated the Georgian military with conventional force. There is some debate as to how the conflict began. Few now doubt that Georgia was responsible for actually initiating the war by attacking the city of Tskhinvali on the evening of August 7—but Russian presence in the region is thought to be at least a partial catalyst.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, however, is the question of whether the war was a product of a broader Russian grand strategy that sought to militarily protect its sphere of interest. Shortly after Russian intelligence discovered that the Georgian

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Army's 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion was mounting an offensive in Tskhinvali, Russian 40th Army forces were pre-positioned for a counter-attack.<sup>2</sup> Moving through the Roki Tunnel, the confrontation quickly escalated into all-out war, expanding into greater Georgia and including the second front in Abkhazia. Almost immediately, comparisons were made to the Red Army's 1968 invasion of Prague and its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

Outside of Moscow, two general theories have dominated the discussion of Russia's role in the war. The first might be referred to as the historical hegemonic one, which pits a post-Cold War Russia in an ever-compromised regional sphere in which it pursues strong-arm policies against Georgia in order to instill its historical, but lost, dominance over the small state.<sup>4</sup> This argument draws a direct parallel between "Western policy decisions on Kosovo and NATO enlargement" and the Russian leadership's justification of the war.<sup>5</sup> The second is the fear-of-a-Western-state theory, in which Russia uses forceful coercion to punish Georgia for choosing to lean west—seen particularly in Tbilisi's desire to join NATO.<sup>6</sup> This theory presupposes that if NATO had not attempted to offer Georgia the Membership Action Plan (MAP), Russia would not have pursued a preventive war as a "deterrent."<sup>7</sup> Both of these theories possess the common assertion that the war was more about Russia's relationship with the West, and the protection of its sphere of interest from the Westernization of a state growing ever more Western, than about the localized ethnic conflict that intensified after the Cold War.

This article addresses the idea that the war was directly a part of an integrated strategy to protect Russia's sphere and dissuade the westernization of Georgia—such as its ascendance into NATO. Examining decision-making through the Kremlin's actions, rhetoric and policies reveal a clearer understanding of whether the war reflected that Moscow's regional foreign policy—its "grand strategy"—had taken a militarily confrontational turn or was simply the result of short-term planning and the poor state of Russian civil-military coordination. While some may point to the nefariousness of Moscow's intentions, little has been written that deconstructs these intentions in the war, particularly regarding the actions and words of its leaders. Did the war reflect a set of integrated concepts that could explain Moscow's intentions for the region in a broader, long-term view? Or was the war a result of the precisely opposite phenomenon: not having a strategy, and, thus, a failure to foresee many of the effects? This distinction is essential to understanding Russia's disposition during the war, as this article addresses.

Central to an objective assessment is the importance of leadership decision-making leading up to the war. The West wanted to know if this was a new precedent in Russian foreign policy, perhaps with resurgent ambitions. The article argues that, leading up to and over the course of the war, a specific policy was not understood among civilian and military leadership.<sup>8</sup> While evoking a sense that command and control was erratic, Moscow's decision-making was pragmatic and does not necessarily point to a cohesively integrated grand strategy that included planning for war with Georgia—beyond the intimidation that preceded the war.

The organization of this article is as follows: first, it establishes the context from which the South Ossetian War emerged and the culmination of policies between Tbilisi and Moscow, both since the end of the Cold War and since the Rose Revolution in 2003. Second, it provides some immediate and long-term expected outcomes for Moscow as they relate to the war itself. Third, it presents three possible models of Russian strategic planning through which to view the context of the war. Fourth, it traces the events lead-

ing to the war that occurred within the breakaway republics. Finally, it provides some insight as to how the war affected Russia's role in the world, and why the non-integration of strategic concepts matters in this case.

### **Russian Strategic Context**

The Kremlin, under Putin, formed a set of strategic concepts—a vision of Russia's role in the world based on the idea that it should leverage market dominance through state control of its own energy and mineral wealth in order to develop the non-energy and mineral sectors of the economy. This, in turn, would achieve competitiveness in connectivity with the global economy, in an era of Russian international economic improvement, and thus gain respect and a greater position in the world.<sup>9</sup> Central to the domestic end of this is the role of what Vladislav Surkov explained as the “wholeness” of a sovereign democracy: that Russia would need to collectively forego certain freedoms in the short term to achieve economic prosperity in the long term.<sup>10</sup> The foreign policy aspect of it—that is, Russia's active role in the world—maintains that a “sphere” or “orbit” of interest, a roughly derived area in its geopolitical region (i.e. Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East, Central Asia), exists in order to support Russian economic objectives.<sup>11</sup> This concept is the basis for what Putin and several of his close advisers believe will restore Russia's status as a major player on the world stage, and could serve as its grand strategy. To the degree that this theory exists in the Kremlin's collective consciousness, it does not appear to be integrated throughout the military and security services.

Three questions are relevant in gaining a long-term perspective on the conflict and how it fits into Russian strategic planning. First, who makes decisions in a time of war? Second, did decision-making surrounding the war in Georgia constitute a conscious shift in grand strategy on the part of the Kremlin, signifying a new confrontational foreign policy? And, finally, what does this say about how Russia currently sees itself in the region and in the world? Assessing the answers to these questions is important in forming a broader contextual understanding of Russian intentions. To be sure—since one cannot sit in on a high-level meeting with Russian leaders—“decision-making” as it is referred to herein shall mean evidence based on actions, rhetoric and stated policies.

The context of the war should be examined in light of Moscow's role while considering some of the following points. First, though Georgian forces struck Tskhinvali before the Russian counter-offensive began, both Moscow and Tbilisi were guilty of events that contributed to the escalation of the crisis. Second, Moscow was worried that since the Orange, Rose, and Tulip color-revolutions were successful elsewhere, the West could attempt to foment one in Russia. This fear plays itself out in the policies of regional strategic influence in which Moscow engages. This is more often a result of historical conflict—evidenced by Russian dominance in the South Caucasus, the Crimea, and the Central Eurasian regions—than a stated goal. Third, the buildup in Europe of both NATO forces and possible US missile defense sites in Poland has been perceived as growing infringement on Russia's historical sphere of influence. And, lastly, an oft-cited driver for Russian engagement in the world has been its vast resources in the energy sector. Much of this wealth is based on transport rents paid to Europe from energy activity in the Caspian Sea. When alternative pipelines emerged that bypassed Russian territory altogether—such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the proposed Nabucco natural gas pipeline—Moscow further sensed Western infringement.<sup>12</sup>

As with other former Soviet republics (FSRs), Georgia has sought to free itself from Russian influence, moving politically and economically closer to Europe and the US and hoping, as mentioned, to one day join NATO. Despite a national poll in January 2008 that cited a majority of citizens favored NATO membership, President Mikhail Saakashvili's bid for a membership action plan (MAP) at the NATO summit that same year in Bucharest was denied.<sup>13</sup> French and German apprehensiveness about Georgian and Ukrainian MAPs were connected to Russia's general disapproval, and to the possibility of oil and gas shutoffs in Western Europe. Some observers claimed that a Russian resurgence was underway, aimed at squeezing Western Europe into compliance with Russian policies through its energy transport while simultaneously applying pressure on FSRs to remain within Russia's sphere of influence.<sup>14</sup>

The post-Cold War story of Georgia is the story of the struggle to regain a territory whose people did not exhibit a natural allegiance to Tbilisi. After Russia resisted Zviad Gamsakhurdia's invasion of South Ossetia in 1992, the South Ossetians maintained unofficial "status quo" independence. In the aftermath of a signed ceasefire, periodic violence continued with no decisive long-term solution. While both South Ossetia and Abkhazia were never formally recognized as republics by Russia, Moscow supported both states with peacekeeping forces.<sup>15</sup> Tensions between Georgia and Russia regarding the Russian military's proximity, and the negative change in relations following Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003, grew during 2007 and reached a boiling point in the spring of 2008.

### **Moscow's Perceived Strategic Outcomes**

The range of perceived Russian strategic objectives can be examined either as immediate and direct or long-term and indirect.<sup>16</sup> Following the 2008 conflict, Western officials, analysts and commentators broadly discussed its various causes. If any of them contradicted one another, they did so without having a great effect on Russia's future actions. In short, any of these causes are potential Kremlin objectives for rationalizing Russian engagement in the conflict. It may have been that these objectives were considered contingencies, but a stated intention alone to fulfill them does not necessarily constitute a shift in Russian strategy. It would be falsely premised to assume that strategic objectives alone indelibly show cause. Instead, they demonstrate what Moscow might hope to achieve by going to war with Georgia over the breakaway regions.

#### **Immediate Operational Objectives**

- Punish Georgia by forcing its military withdrawal from South Ossetia; destroy Georgian military installations so it couldn't resume an attack.
- Provide a continual peacekeeping role in post-conflict South Ossetia.
- Expand military foothold in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.
- Create a political environment in which Russia could affect broad recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent from Georgia.
- Affect the political environment in Tbilisi so much so that it topples the Saakashvili government.

#### **Long-Term Strategic Objectives**

- Communicate to Georgia and the West that Russia will not tolerate the encirclement caused by NATO enlargement.

- Communicate to other countries, particularly CIS states, that Russia will not accept regional challenges that compromise its perceived sphere of influence.
- Stem further enlargement of NATO by affecting Georgia's military readiness for MAP status.
- Force specific EU countries to make a decision between further NATO expansion and natural gas sales from Russia, even if only through tacit threats of the possibility of cutting off delivery.
- Force a western reassessment of the southern corridor energy strategy (including the proposed Nabucco pipeline).<sup>17</sup>

### Strategic Explanations

Tracing pre-conflict decision-making yields an image of Moscow in which its policy stance on Georgia might be explained while considering a series of rationales. The first of these posits that the decision to separate Abkhazia and South Ossetia completely from Georgian sovereignty was fully integrated into a grand strategic concept—thus, the argument that Russia's invasion was premeditated would hold weight. The Russian government may have militarily integrated a strategy that focused primarily on maintaining an ill-defined (either by Russia or anyone else) sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, and Georgia could have figured very prominently within it. This explanation assumes that the Russian military was in lock-step with the Kremlin and with Putin's staff regarding how to carry out policy in Georgia. Another explanation is that whatever the Kremlin and military models of decision-making are, a primary aim is to deceive the world community into believing something other than the truth. A third hypothesis assumes that Russia may not have integrated a grand strategic concept among its security services and military, which would be evidenced in an abundance of disaggregation in decision-making, specifically among civilian and military planners. And, finally, another explanation is that decision-making was strictly pragmatic and reactive.

### Integration

To define an "integrated" grand strategy, consider four aspects of how governments may function holistically. First, intelligence is shared throughout senior levels of government, security, and military services in a reasonably non-compartmentalized way, so as to support a single set of unifying concepts. There is a general consensus, shared throughout senior levels of government, the economic community, and the intelligence and defense community. This consensus regards what each one of these groups sees as its country's role in the world; the balance between the country's internal dynamics and its external connections and relations; and, especially, how supportive the public is of all this.

Similarly, a strategic concept concerning the defense of a country from external threats that conceivably exists at the highest levels of government is only useful if it can be culturally synthesized among civilian and military officials. In his address to the Russian federal assembly in 2008, Putin said that "a society is capable of setting and tackling large-scale national tasks only when it has a common system of moral reference point, when a country maintains respect for native language, for its unique culture and values."<sup>18</sup> The importance of this underscores a central tenet of grand strategy: the centrality of cultural mandate in the strategic direction that elites select to direct a country.

Regardless of how a leader is perceived writ large, he or she is bound, to some degree, to the direction toward which a populace is leaning.

Military operations—actual or contemplated ones—ought to be consistent with civilian leadership's strategic goals and communicated foreign policy. As in Soviet times, this would indicate a noticeably subordinate military to civilian decision-making. Such was the case in the Red Army's invasion of Prague in 1968, in which the military had planned first to invade Romania; this appeared logical to many within the military. When the decision from Moscow came instead to invade Czechoslovakia, some high-ranking generals protested—and were quickly removed.<sup>19</sup> A similar kind of command structure—wherein civilian strategy trumps military strategy—should be evident if a state's grand strategy is integrated.

Realistically, decisions and actions occur as circumstances arise, and ought to be consistent with political, military, economic, social and other national sources of history, as well as objectives, capabilities, and global role. Though various nuances exist that make every government's functionality intrinsically unique, this definition suits a range of purposes for examining wartime and crisis decision-making.

### **Strategic Deception or Disunity?**

Every country, at one time or another, engages in deception as a means of creating doubt in its adversary's perception. Russia's declared policy, and its implemented policy, have at times contradicted with one another, and with calculated effect. On one hand, Moscow was frequently defensive in its rhetoric following the war, yet reassuring that a new Cold War was just as undesirable to Russia as it was to Washington.<sup>20</sup> As Anatol Lieven noted about the speeches given by Medvedev, Putin, and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the Valdai Club Meeting in September 2008, "There was no significant difference between them in what they said about Russian policy and Russian views," though "what we are facing is a very united and determined Russian approach which is strongly supported by the entire top leadership."<sup>21</sup> This implies that the policy was holistically implemented throughout the top echelons of government—which is to say that senior officials at least understood a common message.

The deception model might be described as follows. Russian leadership—namely that of Putin, the *siloviki*<sup>22</sup> in his administration, and Medvedev and his staff—made calculated decisions in their response to the Georgian attack to force a specific Western perception that they were only responding to aggression. The desired perception was that decision-making was ad hoc, and that little or no pre-thought had gone into planning the Georgia war. Thus, leaders wished to convey the notion that they were forced to respond to actions carried out by Georgia, and that little forethought went into planning a response; this explanation places emphasis on Russia as the defenders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In this case, decision-making in Moscow would have seemed non-integrated with international perception but actually integrated in reality. Those who would hold to this model of Russian behavior would suggest, in the hope of confusing the West, that such behavior is *intentionally* erratic, disjointed, and at times contradictory. Ideally, this would then lead to a misperception and false assessment of Moscow's intentions. The benefit to this strategy is that it would create the illusion that Moscow was not prepared for war and was taken by surprise—masking the notion that Russia had been prepared to respond, based on months of incursions from both sides prior to the war.<sup>23</sup> One possibility for concealing Moscow's

intentions is that the Kremlin may have believed that any notion of being found responsible for the war's initiation would invite a wider response, possibly with NATO involvement.

Another sign of disjointedness in Moscow was that not all key civilian leaders appeared to understand the supposed plan for war, based on the escalation pattern and the problems with command during their actions on the ground. This would indicate that Russia's long-term planning to detach South Ossetia was fraught with problems. For example, Alexander Darchiev, deputy mission chief to the US, declared that in his communications with the State Department he had assured that Russia had "no plans to invade Georgia or be pulled into war with Georgia."<sup>24</sup> Darchiev must have been confused when he found that as his statement went to press, the Russian military was taking Gori, a city beyond the breakaway regions in greater Georgia.

### **Non-Integrated**

Another possible explanation is that integration is secondary to decision-making, and, as such, the compartmentalization of leadership can create confusion and miscalculation. The "fog of war" extends beyond military personnel on the ground to include political leaders. This explanation would also assume that the militarization of regional political and economic issues, namely the subject of energy, had not occurred as of the initiation of the war in Georgia. Senior leadership in Moscow may not have been planning a military confrontation with Georgia or any other country, and therefore were making up strategy as events unfolded; political leadership decision-making was reactive and pragmatic. This might also begin to explain the long overdue military reform program discussed soon after the war.<sup>25</sup> The notion that the military was so out-of-step with what civilian leaders regarded as being integrated with national policy was only then a real priority.

A lack of deliberate, integrated strategy might be explained three ways. First, it could have been a result of the Putin era's focus on the energy sector, economic growth, anti-corruption maneuvers, and counter-terrorism and tax reform policies, as opposed to bolstering its aging Cold War-era military. Indeed, Moscow's policy toward Georgia for several years prior to the war had been based on economic embargoes. A planned invasion of Georgia with sizeable forces would have required a symbiosis between the Kremlin, the security services, the defense ministry, and the foreign ministry on how military action into Georgian territory would fit into Putin's economic development plans. Nor was long-stalled planning for military reform by Putin related to Georgia—though what the Russians considered their poor performance in Georgia has incited a renewed impulse to proceed with their plans for a streamlined military.<sup>26</sup>

A second explanation for Russia's possible lack of integration between civilian leadership and the military is the assumption that, because Putin was focused so heavily on the economy, he and his staff were unable to devote sufficient long-term planning to actions regarding Georgia. But this is not the case at all—Putin has spent ample time on issues involving South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and NATO MAPs. Following the conflict, the Kremlin was so appalled by the military's performance that they immediately increased their focus on military transformation.<sup>27</sup> This argument, ultimately, does not account for the gap between Putin's interest in an issue and the government's ability to leverage its resources optimally in support of that interest.

Another explanation for a lack of integration in policy toward Georgia is that

Russian leadership did not address foreign policy objectives in terms of short- and long-term goals. As one analyst pointed out, the Georgian war could have “jeopardized hopes for Russia to pursue a path of economic modernization based on ‘innovation.’”<sup>31</sup> Had Russian leaders considered the possible outcomes of the war in a broader context, they would likely have realized certain pitfalls. For instance, Georgia would be drawn closer to NATO, and the voices of expansionists who sought to grow the alliance without Russian membership across the 1990s would suddenly seem to have *more* credibility. Second, NATO—and especially the US—might arm Georgia in destabilizing ways.<sup>29</sup> Third, if Russia appeared as anything more than a peacekeeper for the breakaway regions,

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### **Pragmatism as an Institutionalized Norm**

In the absence of an integrated grand strategy, decision-making by an authoritative body might be disjointed, evolutionary and reactive, and formation of policy occurs pragmatically as events occur. In this model, the leadership—in this case, the tandem of Medvedev and Putin—makes decisions based on the

information supplied to it from its close inner circles (i.e. bureaucrats, the *siloviki*, and industry elites). In other words, leaders become aware, they confer, they process, and they react. Information, and indeed international politics, may inundate them at a faster rate than their ability to make broad decisions that anticipate consequences. Their actions are centralized in what is loosely known as the “power vertical”—leaders are lock-step with Putin, but policy follows concepts only loosely.<sup>31</sup>

Some basic facts surrounding Russian leadership during the war fit the pragmatist model, if only anecdotally. As the crisis erupted, Putin was at the Beijing Olympics, Medvedev was vacationing in Sochi, and Minister of Defense Anatoliy Serdyukov was also out of the country. This coincides with the adaptive response by Putin and others to Georgia’s attack on Tbilisi. Instead of Medvedev, who officially handles much of the foreign policy, or Serdyukov, civilian leader of the military, it was Putin who immediately rushed back from Beijing to meet commanders in Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia. This fact contradicts what Putin said later about Medvedev’s role in the crisis: “It was ‘a shame,’ Mr. Putin said, that the crisis had fallen to Mr. Medvedev, whom he described as ‘an intelligent, contemporary man of liberal views.’ He said the decision to respond was Mr. Medvedev’s;’ not a single tank ... would have moved without direct orders from Medvedev. ‘I never impose my advice on him.’”<sup>32</sup> Though this could have been an attempt on Putin’s part to appear subordinate in his prime ministerial role, it says nothing about the fact that *he* was the civilian leader who took control in this case.

Several statements from senior Kremlin leaders added to a sense of confusion, which could mean that the message was either not “united” or was purposefully deceptive. To illustrate this, consider a statement made by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. In the middle



of the war, when pressed about the military's push into the sovereign region of central Georgia, Lavrov snapped back that Georgia "can forget about' its territorial integrity because the Georgian government under ... Mikhail Saakashvili had committed so many atrocities that the two breakaway regions could never live under Georgian rule."<sup>33</sup> In an op-ed in the *Financial Times* the day before, Lavrov maintained that "Russia responded to this unprovoked assault on its citizens," and that its "response has been targeted, proportionate and legitimate."<sup>34</sup> A week later, though, he stated that his government had every intention of implementing the plan endorsed by Medvedev and Nicolas Sarkozy in Moscow on August 12.<sup>35</sup> Whether this was deliberately confusing or a symptom of ill preparation is an important distinction to consider; it either suggests that Lavrov delivered the message incorrectly or that it was precisely intended. While one statement expressed the desire for regime change in Tbilisi, the other was restrained, even accommodating.

### Events Leading to War

It is important to understand that the re-ignition of tension between Georgia and Russia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia—which began in the early 1990s when Georgian President Gamsakhurdia invaded South Ossetia and saw a lull under President Eduard Shevardnadze—resumed in 2003 with the Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's determination to reassure control over the two territories.<sup>36</sup> Subsequent events only reinforced harsh sentiments made earlier. Possible future "color revolutions"<sup>37</sup> would further exacerbate Moscow's fear of encroachment and further break down the credibility of the CIS as a regional security organization. Russia feared that another color revolution was eventually planned for Moscow. After the war in Kosovo, Moscow became more deeply concerned about Western influence.<sup>38</sup> As a result of the Rose Revolution, the Saakashvili government became seen as a pro-Western, anti-Russia entity. Following the possibility of a formal NATO-Russia security unification in the early-to-mid-1990s—and as NATO became larger without Russia—Moscow experienced a greater sense of exclusion and encroachment.

The basis of Russian-Georgian tensions was consistent throughout the post-Cold War years; Russia perceived Georgian collusion with Western nations as part of the West's strategy of encirclement. Meanwhile, Georgia sought to break away from any Russian constraint on its independence, rooted in what Tbilisi thought was a recreation of the Soviet consolidation of regional power. Abkhazia and South Ossetia were becoming Moscow's geopolitical quid-pro-quo and Georgia's Achilles heel. From 2006 onward, events escalated Russian-Georgian relations to a breaking point. In October 2006, Russia responded to Georgia's expulsion of its intelligence agents with an economic embargo.<sup>39</sup> From this point on, periodic cross-border rocket attacks occurred in and around villages in the Kodori Gorge. On March 11, 2007, UN Observers (UNOMIG) witnessed a Russian military helicopter fire in the area.<sup>40</sup>

A series of events in 2008 precipitated the August conflict. In January of that year, Saakashvili won a plebiscite on the country's desire to join NATO. With Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia in February, and its overwhelming Western support, Russia immediately reiterated a former claim that this would serve as a precedent for both Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence from Georgia.<sup>41</sup> This was followed on March 6 by Russia's withdrawal from a CIS sanctions treaty that had limited independent trade relations with Abkhazia.

NATO enlargement only added to the Putin-era sense of Western encirclement. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April, the 2008 North Atlantic Council temporarily rejected membership action plans for Georgia *and* Ukraine, but agreed that *both* “will become members of NATO” and stated that “therefore we will now begin a period of intensive engagement with both at a high political level.”<sup>42</sup> Moscow showed a sense of urgency following this, and moved to send whatever clear message it could that would prevent further Georgian moves to membership.<sup>43</sup> On April 16, 2008, Putin signed a formal decree officially authorizing direct relations between Russia and the Georgian separatist regions, followed by the spread of aid, Russian passports, and security assistance in a move that caused the Tbilisi government to fear change that Moscow would annex the two regions.<sup>44</sup> On April 21, a MiG-29 entered Georgian airspace and shot down an unmanned aerial vehicle heading toward Abkhazia.<sup>45</sup>

Following the April decree, events became increasingly militarized in relation to the breakaway regions, but collusion with Moscow was not always overt. In May, Russia sent additional troops to aid its peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia, then totaling over 2,500.<sup>46</sup> On May 21, the *Kavkaz Press* reported that Georgia staged a bombing of two buses in Gali, claiming that Abkhaz separatists were responsible.<sup>47</sup> A week and a half later, on May 31, the Russian Defense Ministry deployed 400 Railway Forces to Abkhazia to repair an old railroad line. Georgia immediately complained that the deployment was an attempt by Russia to annex Abkhazia.<sup>48</sup> The director of CIS, Konstantin Zatulin, came to Russia’s defense, stating that “Unlike unmanned aerial vehicles, the railway troops do not appear on the territory of Georgia itself.”<sup>49</sup> Following this, on July 3, was the assassination attempt, supposedly by the Eduard Kokoity government in Tskhinvali, of South Ossetian leader Dmitry Sanakoyev. On July 6, the Saakashvili government charged that Moscow was responsible for a series of explosions on Georgia’s side of the administered border with Abkhazia.<sup>50</sup> Russia denied this and inferred that Georgia was engaging in acts of terrorism in order to draw Moscow into war, ironically the strategy eventually cited by Tbilisi and the West in regard to Moscow.<sup>51</sup> That same day, Tbilisi accused Russia of delivering a large amount of arms to Abkhazia.<sup>52</sup> Both Sukhumi and the Russian ministry of defense denied this. After a bomb exploded at a café in Gali on July 7, Abkhazia blamed Georgia and severed ties with Tbilisi. Periodic clashes between the Georgian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists occurred—such as one in the Kodori Gorge on July 9, in which Georgia claimed to have killed four who had attacked Georgian police.<sup>53</sup> Abkhaz leaders claimed its armed forces had come under fire first. By this time, conflicting stories had become the norm. The degree of Moscow’s long-term commitment remained unclear.

Further events escalated tensions in days that followed. On July 11, the Georgian foreign ministry announced that an upcoming meeting between Medvedev and Saakashvili had been cancelled. On the following day, as Saakashvili called on the international community to support a Georgian protest against Russia, the EU officially raised the issue of airspace violations with Moscow.<sup>54</sup> On July 12, Russia opened new checkpoints near the Kodori Gorge. And on July 14, German-brokered efforts for a peace agreement began to break down as Abkhaz leaders rejected parts of it.<sup>55</sup>

In the days just before the outbreak of the war, beginning on July 16, tension became focused on military exercises. The yearly Russian Kavkaz exercise took place in North Ossetia near the Georgian border and included 8,000 troops, along with much of the same hardware and operational formations that Russia would employ in the conflict days later.<sup>56</sup>

“One scenario was a hypothetical attack by unnamed (but undoubtedly Georgian) forces on Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” wrote Jim Nichol, noting that “Russian forces practiced a counterattack by land, sea, and air to buttress its ‘peacekeepers’ stationed in regions, protect ‘Russian citizens,’ and offer humanitarian aid.”<sup>57</sup> Whether or not this was a rehearsal, it was a clear sign that military planners had at least considered the possibility of war with Georgia, given the similarities between exercises and the war.

On the other side of the border, however, Georgians were conducting the Immediate Response 2008 joint exercise with 600 of their own and 1,000 American special forces troops (as well as forces from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine).<sup>58</sup> It is not clear whether the Russian decision to conduct the Kavkaz exercise around the same time was a direct response to the Immediate Response exercise. While both were likely planned months in advance, the details of their exact scheduling are likely classified.<sup>59</sup> The Russian military’s exercise, however, began days after the Immediate Response 2008, and included one military to coordinate with, rather than five—which could mean that its coordination schedule was shorter.

As military escalation occurred, Moscow newspapers on August 5 claimed that, contrary to recent events being centered on Abkhazia, escalation was shifting to Tskhinvali.<sup>60</sup> Whether this was a prediction on the part of analysts is less illuminating than the fact that, in the words of Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin, the escalation in the conflict zone was “caused by the disproportionate use of force by the Georgian side.”<sup>61</sup> This raises the possibility of one or more rationales for Moscow’s seemingly poised positioning of forces. First, Moscow’s senior leaders saw violence increasing by Georgia in South Ossetia and shifted additional forces from Abkhazia to join other forces near Vladikavkaz. Second, as the war began less than two days after this, very little time was allowed for shifting military strategy from Abkhazia to an assault from the north on Georgian forces in Tskhinvali. This may have complicated mobility and logistics, which seemed to be evidenced in postwar assessments, which indicated the poor control and heavy-handed tactics of the Russian military. It may also suggest there were differing assessments of the conditions on the ground between senior civilian leaders in Moscow and the 58<sup>th</sup> Army in North Ossetia.

While history is fairly certain Georgia fired the first shot, the causes and motivating factors behind this vary greatly. Initial reports out of Tbilisi cited that, early on August 7, rockets were fired at five separate villages in South Ossetia from inside the Russian border.<sup>62</sup> Tbilisi responded by firing upon civilian areas in Tskhinvali. Russia maintained that the army responded to Georgian attack on Tskhinvali from its position in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia and only then deployed reinforcement forces into Georgia. Moscow never denied its presence in the breakaway regions after the war had begun, in addition to the peacekeepers it had already stationed there. Quickly following the war, Russia moved to recognize South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence, and therefore neither were a part of Georgia anymore in Moscow’s policy.<sup>63</sup> The violation of sovereignty, in their minds, was by Georgian incursions into the breakaway regions. South Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity complained on August 7 that Georgian intelligence was planning “acts of terrorism.”<sup>64</sup> Still, Russian troops reacted with surprise to the Georgian attack that followed—as though their own intelligence did not alert ground forces during the days and hours leading up to it. This is in spite of the fact that Russian troops had been near the region for at least two weeks.<sup>65</sup>

It became difficult to distinguish between decision-making on the battlefield and decisions made by Moscow. The final move was Russia's decision to send troops and equipment through the Roki Tunnel. A discrepancy arose following the war about exactly what time troops actually entered the tunnel and emerged on the Georgian side. For some time after the war broke out, Saakashvili claimed the Russian Army attacked prior to Georgia's attack;<sup>66</sup> this could have been confused with the mortar and rocket fire that had occurred on-and-off for weeks prior to the conflict. A violation of sovereignty by rocket fire—though offensive and devastating—is significantly different than a violation by full-scale invasion. Moreover, both sides viewed sovereignty *vis-à-vis* South Ossetia differently, as that precise issue drove them to war. With respect to Saakashvili's claim that Russian troops and vehicles first began moving across the border into South Ossetia, a US intelligence official indicated that this would be nearly impossible to verify without having had monitoring technology or overhead surveillance in place at the time.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, few disagree that Russia's response followed Saakashvili's order to attack Tskhinvali with BM-21 Grad rockets on August 8.<sup>68</sup>

Some evidence shows, however, that Russian intelligence operations could have been tied to a prewar policy, but does not alone suggest an intended preemptive war. One report stated that prior to the conflict there was no Russian ground presence, despite the medals awarded to over fifty FSB, GRU and SVR intelligence officers just days after the conflict began.<sup>69</sup> FSB director Alexander Bortnikov admitted to Medvedev four days after the war began that "Georgian special services, before the commission of the act of aggression in South Ossetia, conducted active intelligence activity on the territory of the republic and in border areas on the territory of the Russian Federation."<sup>70</sup> If there had been intelligence coordination between the security services and the ground forces, the 58<sup>th</sup> Army would have greater cause to preposition itself inside the tunnel and beyond, rather than waiting for the attack on the north side. Instead, ground forces were positioned in the tunnel. The problem with drawing conclusions from supposed intelligence activity prior to the conflict is that such operations were likely routine to Russian policy and had occurred with some regularity.

### **Fragmentation and Postwar Military Confusion**

As the war progressed, actions of the Russian military differed greatly from Moscow's declarative policy and the rhetoric of its leaders. Following the ceasefire deal brokered by France's Sarkozy after five days, Russian tanks still attacked Gori on August 13, well beyond the southern border of South Ossetia.<sup>71</sup> Days later, after Medvedev announced that troops would withdraw from the breakaway regions, the Russian counteroffensive took significant positions deep within Georgia. Despite the fact that Moscow had negotiated a deal, its military commanders pushed on as if the war had not ended. This continued for about eight days, until Moscow finally stopped its own troops.

There are at least two rationales for the theory that the attacks were first enacted by Russian forces. The official reason that Russia gave for the invasion was the defense of Russian citizens living in South Ossetia.<sup>72</sup> Many of the "citizens" were given passports in months before the invasion. If this is the case, it signifies an institutionalized set of policies toward South Ossetia and Abkhazia, one that had long been forecast by Moscow. The second rationale is that Moscow was poised and in position early on August 7, but did not strike, hoping to coerce Georgia into striking first; the Kremlin would then have the

benefit of denying its intentions following the conflict. Therefore, the Kremlin claim that the deployment of troops from Vladikavkaz took a significant amount of time would have validity. There could be no way of reaching the end of the tunnel in the amount of time that Georgia later claimed. This explanation seems unlikely, however, because Russian commanders would have known their presence could be detected due to the presence of Georgian intelligence. Besides the intercepted recording of the border guard and the Russian officer on August 6, there is little open-source evidence of this.<sup>73</sup> The possibility of failure in this case would not only result in international embarrassment, but create internal struggles in Moscow over accountability.

If Saakashvili expected US or European security assistance following his attack on Tskhinvali, he misperceived the relationship.<sup>74</sup> US State Department official Matt Bryza had warned him, hours before the offensive, not to fall into Russian-set traps and initiate action himself; he did not heed this advice.<sup>75</sup> As Dmitri Trenin pointed out shortly after the war broke out, “He [Saakashvili] may have felt that his military, after several years of US-sponsored training and rearmament, was now capable of routing the Ossetian separatists and neutralizing the Russian peacekeepers.”<sup>76</sup> It is clear that the US was not entirely trusting of Saakashvili’s word. One American commentator noted that, despite contested versions of the events, “US officials doubt Saakashvili’s claim that the Russians were already moving troops through the Roki Tunnel toward South Ossetia when Georgia launched its attack.”<sup>77</sup> While at the onset of the war this might have been in question, it quickly became evident the Russian military stationed around Vladikavkaz and in the Roki Tunnel were poised to attack, but did not strike prior to the Georgian military’s move on Tskhinvali.

The idea that Russia was positioned to invade when Saakashvili moved troops into South Ossetia in order to quell separatist violence is problematic. This could, in turn, make Moscow look like the a savior of the South Ossetian people among the international community while also reinvigorating its sphere of influence after years of NATO’s eastward expansion. If this were indeed the Russian leadership’s initiation of a conflict, it may have been trying to create a *fait accompli* before Georgia was admitted to NATO. One assumes that Russian leadership understands clearly that, if Georgia had been a full NATO member, this would have constituted an Article 5 incident, and conflict between Russia and the West would likely have ensued if the required NATO consultations resulted in a decision to send troops or air support. Or, alternatively, Article 5 would have shown to be an empty provision—the way it was after September 11, 2001, when it was declared for the first time in NATO’s history. As it was reasonably clear that Moscow did not want a hot war with NATO, it would seem far easier for Moscow to preemptively split off the two areas from Georgia before Georgia’s NATO membership. Thus, if Russian leadership factored these considerations into prewar planning, finding an excuse to strike quickly and decisively was of paramount importance. There is a lack of direct evidence that this was indeed the motive behind the Russian military’s movement prior to the war, and one cannot assume that the Kremlin’s political posture is tied directly to its military posture.

### **Scattered Leaders and Fragmentation**

The Russian reaction on August 7 to Georgia’s bombing of Tskhinvali was carried out within minutes—but if it had been planned in Moscow, there are, nonetheless, unexplained anomalies about the chain of command. Both the president (constitutionally, the Commander in Chief) and the prime minister were away from Moscow at the time; Medve-

dev was on a cruise on the Volga River and Putin was in Beijing for the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. Defense Minister Serdyukov was vacationing on the Black Sea coast. These facts have potentially different meanings if viewed through the context of the decision-making models presented earlier. They may suggest that no prior strategy existed, because those who would likely oversee it were missing at the breakout of the war. Few wars in history have been initiated with a state's leaders on vacation or out of country. This might appear arbitrary, but indeed it says something about the Russian leadership's role. This notion notwithstanding, Russia and Georgia had been maneuvering over Abkhazia and South Ossetia for at least the prior 18 years. This suggests that the 58<sup>th</sup> Army's prepositioning on the other side of the Roki Tunnel was the result of ongoing tension, and that civilian leaders had seen no cause for this tension to escalate to the point of war. The complexity of the events of August 6–8, discussed earlier, points to this possibility.

Furthermore, the telling fact about the intercept is that the series of conversations implied a fragmentation in command—a sign of either a lack of strategic forethought by the Kremlin or a of an unprepared military, panicked and lacking unity of command. The 102<sup>nd</sup> Army brigade, along with tank and artillery brigades, entered the tunnel 24 hours before it attacked within the sovereign borders of Georgia. The fact that this was a day or more prior to firing suggests serious flaws in command. Civilian leaders may not have known about specific positions. Had Putin, Medvedev, and Serdyukov known, a decision might have been made earlier about whether to pull back or to commence an attack. To have made no decision in the period between August 6 and late August 8 infers that no guidance existed as to how leaders would deal with the political fallout following the war *and* that this fallout was not assessed prior to the war. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that Russian leadership had not made a prior decision to advance all the way into Tbilisi and remove Saakashvili from power altogether.

The absence of leadership from Moscow at a crucial moment is noteworthy, but the degree to which it fits some model of strategic deception is doubtful. Strategic deception is used by every government, and its use in this case or any other does not unequivocally suggest the conspiracy to implement a grand strategy. It can be employed at very tactical levels. No analysis assessed in the days following the war mentioned the importance of these kinds of tactics, beyond underlining the fact that Putin rushed home immediately from Beijing and took control of the situation. Whether deception was effective or not is less important than whether it was part of a national strategy or simply the pragmatic use of institutional norms within the security services. More than three years have passed, and the role of deception by Russian leaders in the war—other than the various instances of contradiction and implied strategic communication mentioned above—is made no clearer by the available open-source information.

The fact that the force applied against Georgia showed restraint—except that the war ended in five days—adds a layer of confusion when set against civilian language discussed in other areas of this article, and points to the independence of military decision-making during the war. To be sure, however, the force applied during the war included capabilities beyond the realm of peacekeeping. In addition to reacting to Georgia's attack on Tskhinvali by pushing through South Ossetia, Russian forces also mounted an offensive from the north into Abkhazia. Russian Tu-22 Backfire bombers and Su-24s Fencer and Su-27 Flanker attack aircraft conducted raids over Gori, Rustavi, and near the capital

Tbilisi, losing seven aircraft over the course of the war to Georgian air defense.<sup>78</sup> Russian forces also struck areas very close to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) gas pipeline, calling attention to the centrality of energy vulnerability in modern conflict.<sup>79</sup> SS-21 Tochka and SS-26 Iskandar SRBMs were also fired into Georgian territory. The Russian navy's Black Sea Fleet took positions along the Georgian coast in Poti and Sokhumi, creating a blockade, and sunk a Georgian surface combatant ship and a number of coast guard vessels.<sup>80</sup> By the time the war ended, Russian forces had destroyed the majority of Georgian military capabilities and communications infrastructure. Additionally, buffer zones had been established beyond both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, several miles inside Georgia proper. Finally, regarding the withdrawal of troops from Georgia—in relation to the Sarkozy brokered withdrawal plan, which stipulated an end to hostilities—the process was slow and the military appeared reluctant throughout.<sup>81</sup> These events appeared separate and ulterior to Kremlin intentions, especially given their political ramifications, and could point to a lack of civilian oversight, given the international political ramifications that ensued.

### **Pragmatically Non-Integrated**

The importance of the Georgian issue for the Russian government and the nearly two decades of friction leading up to the August 2008 war makes it likely that the General Staff developed contingency plans long ago. And while it is likely that the North Ossetian 58<sup>th</sup> Army had an operating strategy, there is no evidence that it was integrated with strategies of the FSB *spetsnaz* forces and border security and general purpose forces, who were also operating in Georgia. If there was an overall strategy of the Russian government toward Georgia, it was presumably based on directives from civilian leaders in Moscow to military leaders in senior command positions, as opposed to delegation of authority to the local Russian military to take action under specified contingencies. Both during the Soviet era and in the new Russia, the military has been subordinate to civilian direction.<sup>82</sup>

Russian leaders were either aloof to events, upon Saakashvili's attack, or they had sufficient information but did nothing to integrate it efficiently while the events of the conflict were unfolding. Understandably, as in all wars, real human beings were involved in this, with only partial and confusing information, and were as capable of optimal decision-making as they were of flaws. This possibly accounts for the misleading and erratic nature of rhetoric by Kremlin officials throughout the war. For instance, intelligence analysis, sharing, and dissemination seemed to be at least partially ineffective. Intelligence on Georgian prewar movements was lacking. The intelligence bureaucracy was likely stovepiped and ineffective in getting facts to the key decision-makers—Putin, Medvedev and their teams. More importantly, however, the obscure experiment of the tandem rule underwent its first crisis, under non-integrated conditions.

Together, the war's decision-making conditions underscore a pragmatic, but flawed, leadership that based the majority of its decisions on its reaction to events as they unfolded rather than on executing a rigidly planned strategy. This is not to say that a grand strategy, placing Georgia within Russia's sphere of influence, did not exist. Nor does it necessarily mean that Moscow's leadership was fragmented. It means that, notwithstanding a great degree of political posturing by both Georgia and Russia for months and years prior to the war, coupled with provocations that may have been undertaken by Russia's security

services, this particular war was not a long planned policy simply waiting for the opportunity. Nor did it seem that the Russian government had been waiting to seize an opportunity to send a signal to the West not to interfere in their sphere of influence. This notion is bolstered by the fact that Moscow's was surprised by the reaction from the West to the Russian military's level of force in Georgia and consequent blows to its strategic reputation and global economic condition. Moreover, it points to a flawed leadership that underestimated the ramifications of escalation.

### **Miscalculation**

In the aftermath of the war, several miscalculations by both Georgia and Russia became evident that, had strategic planning had been integrated, might not have otherwise occurred.

### **MAP**

If NATO's MAPs for Georgia and Ukraine were a remote possibility before, they almost immediately became central in the weeks following the conflict. Russian sources have said that the indication that MAPs were progressing favorably—per the outcome of the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008—put Russia on a hair-trigger for Saakashvili's initiative to attack, further emboldening the notion. This subsided after the December 2008 meeting of foreign ministers and the Obama administration's attempt at *perezagruzka*, or "reset."

### **The Scramble**

As described earlier, the Russian military seems to have conducted its own invasion with minimal forces, then scrambled to deploy additional forces as the war unfolded. This is perplexing if decisive victory—including the seizure of Tbilisi and the ousting of Sakaashvili—was the strategic objective. Committing more forces and initiating an offensive on the capital could have accomplished this. By not doing this, Moscow indicated that regime change was not a primary objective., but settled for worse: temporary condemnation and the survival of the Saakashvili regime.

### **US Support to Georgia**

Immediately following the conflict, the US pledged to help Georgia rebuild its economy.<sup>83</sup> Moscow had assumed that the US military's training of Georgians was meant to support the retaking of the breakaway regions, as opposed to the American claim that the training was merely meant to prepare Georgians for counter-insurgency actions in Iraq.<sup>84</sup> This may have meant that Moscow intended to completely defeat the Georgian forces, but stop short of changing the government of the country.

### **A Military in Shambles**

Based on the overall shape in which the overall Russian military establishment was in, Moscow would not have likely welcomed further conflict. This is supported by the fact that, following the war, Medvedev and the Minister of Defense, Anatoli Serdyukov announced a set of military reform and modernization programs, though these plans had been long in preparation. This was the result of the military's performance, the need to employ heavier-handed tactics in the war than were probably necessary.



### **Economic Burdens**

The Russian government may not have realized the war and its generating new confrontation between the US, EU and Georgia on one hand—and Russia on the other—would have a severe effect on their economy, especially in light of the already-crumbling global financial situation. Thus, this would cripple new attempts at long-postponed reform and modernization of its military establishment. The Russian economy began showing signs of significant slowing of growth in July, prior to the conflict, though they had previously thought they were largely immune from the global effects of the American financial collapse.<sup>85</sup> Capital flight that took place as one consequence of the war was not anticipated. The value of the ruble decreased as well.

### **New Exclusion**

Russia was clearly surprised about the fallout in the international community from its military intervention in Georgia. The possibility that the G-8 might become the G-7 was even mentioned in the 2008 US presidential campaign. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) remained silent and thus unsupportive of Russia's role in the war. Even Belarus had to be strong-armed into a reluctant acknowledgement of Russia's action. NATO members suspended discussions in the NATO–Russia Council indefinitely.

These ramifications of the conflict were not what Russia expected, given their assumption that defending the Abkhazians and Ossetians was a noble cause. Altogether, these factors indicated that Russia's action in Georgia was not part of a grand strategy *per se*, but absolutely particular to the local situation.

### **Conclusions**

The discussion presented here enables a few inferences about Russia's role in the world following its experience in the South Ossetian War, particularly as it relates to the theoretical underpinnings of Russian hegemony and resurgence, discussed in the works of Asmus, Cornel and others.<sup>86</sup> First, the Georgian conflict may have been regarded by the Russian leadership as an opportunity for Russia to expand its influence regionally, were it not for the fact that the only support they received following the war from CIS states, was begrudgingly from Belarus. Second, the Russian leadership's short-term decisions were erratic, even seemingly deceptive, because the Kremlin reacted to unfolding events—those of both Georgian and Russian military leadership. It is important to note that the fog of war was exceptionally high, especially since it was not clear whether reporting from the ground was a viable option. Questions remain as to whether Putin and Medvedev had sorted out what their command and control arrangements were, especially after having removed the Chief of General Staff from that chain.<sup>87</sup>

Third, Moscow's short-term decision-making on matters of security and questions of nationalities in the former Soviet space was reactive to events, and was not consistent with what otherwise may have seemed to be a Putin-derived strategic concept of Russia's future. Thus, the Russian leadership did not anticipate the impact of their Georgian intervention on their overall economic condition. Finally, Moscow's long-term objective of establishing CIS/CSTO as a counterbalance to Western expansion of NATO received a severe setback from their actions in Georgia. That is, the former Soviet republics have become even more insistent on their national sovereignty following the war.

If it were true that Moscow had prior knowledge of Georgia's attack on Tskhinvali—and took the opportunity to execute a preemptive policy toward Georgia—it may have indicated that Russian leadership at least had a broader set of policies with regard to Georgia and Ukraine; that rather than having regional strategic aspirations, they were greatly concerned with the perimeter of their near abroad. The nature of Russian foreign policy in the near abroad—and for that matter, any notion of current and evolving grand strategy—remains uneasily characterized. Indeed, Russia has continued to defend the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgian incursion. This “near abroad” strategy has been emerging since at least 1994.<sup>88</sup> Nonetheless, Russian decision-making—through small steps by a small number of elites—seems to be based on a pragmatic approach aimed at sustaining Russia's regional influence. Tit-for-tat shows of force between Georgia and Russia have everything to do with Abkhaz and Ossetian separatists, but do not signal significantly new policy from previous years. The issue of energy and pipelines such as the BTC and the Russian proposed South Stream, alluded to earlier, only complicate the overall evolution of bilateral relations. Putin and Medvedev's “manual control of the power vertical” indicates a highly personal and centralized approach, and ceases to be an ideological expression of national strategy similar to the ideological underpinnings of the Soviet Union's grand strategy.<sup>89</sup> The war was a tremendous strategic blunder for both Saakashvili and the Putin–Medvedev tandem, and the notion that it was simply a Kremlin-based strategic preconception discounts other explanations.

## NOTES

1. The European Commission's report on the war provided a balanced assessment of it a year later. See “Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia,” September 2009, available at <http://www.ceiig.ch/Report.html> (accessed September 18, 2011).

2. See Jim Nichol, “Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests,” CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, August 13, 2008, RL34618; also see Svante E. Cornell, Johanna Popjanevski and Niklas Nilsson, “Russia's War in Georgia: Causes and Implications for Georgia and the World,” Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, Policy Paper, August 2008. The discrepancies in Russia's exact time of strike are discussed briefly later in this article. It has also been noted that among Georgian leadership there is some disagreement as to who started the war. See Roger N. McDermott, “Division in Georgian Political Establishment Continue to Emerge Over Who Started the War,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5, no. 229, December 2, 2008. As the article points out, the details are extremely complex and difficult to fully decipher.

3. See, for example, Eugene Rumer, “Another Hard Landing for Russia?,” *The Washington Post*, August 13, 2008. For more on expansionism in Soviet grand strategy, see Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Soviet Union* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983). Several other comparisons to Russia in the Cold War are cited in this article.

4. This was the overarching premise of an edited book on the war. See Svante Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, eds., *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009).

5. Cornell and Starr, 2009, 4. Also see Johanna Popjanevski's chapter in the same work, in which the author devotes a section the question of Russian premeditation. She notes that Russian exaggeration of Georgian atrocities, as well as the presence of Russian journalist prior to the war suggest Moscow's She also notes, however, that the outbreak and majority of military action took place in South Ossetia rather than Abkhazia, where it had seemed that Russia had been preparing for the possibility military conflict. See Johanna Popjanevski, “From Sukhumi to Tskhinvali: The

Path to War in Georgia,” Cornell and Starr, eds. 2009, 153–155.

6. Ron Asmus devoted extensive effort to this explanation in his recent book on the war. See Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). He explains that the war was less about localized ethnic differences between Ossetian, Abkhazians and Georgians that it was Russia’s desire to keep Georgia within its self-actualized sphere of influence, before it Westernized any further, namely by NATO membership. See Asmus, 215–221.

7. Asmus, 221.

8. Though only minor research has been done on the strategic implications of Russian decision-making in the South Ossetian War, Nikolai Sokov wrote a very helpful piece on Russian decisions toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia prior to the conflict. See Nikolai Sokov, “The Political and Legal Parameters of Russian Decision-making on Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 6, Program on New Approaches to Russian Security (2009). Other research since the war is mentioned throughout this article.

9. Putin’s dissertation is often seen as the fundamental driving concept for Russia’s economic recovery from the 1998 collapse. See Vladimir Putin, “Mineral Natural Resources in the Strategy for Development of the Russian Economy,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, no. 1 (January/February 2006, translated from the original by Harley Balzer). See also Putin, “Mineralno-syrevye resursy v strategii razvitiia Rossiiskoi ekonomiki,” [Mineral Natural Resources in the Strategy for Development of the Russian Economy], *Zapiski Gornogo Instituta*, St. Petersburg State Mining Institute, 144 (1999), 3–9. Both of these publications were derived from Putin’s dissertation of the same name (published by the St. Petersburg State Mining Institute, 1997).

10. Surkov wrote a piece detailing his thoughts on what Russian political culture meant for the country’s new found role as an international energy giant. Of Russia’s ability to collectively organize for the greater good of society he said, “Our culture is based on perception of the whole and not on manipulation of particulars, on gathering together and not dividing u” See Vladislav Surkov, “Russian Political Culture,” *Russian Social Science Review* 49, no. 6, 81–97.

11. The “Foreign Policy Concept,” released just weeks before the war in Georgia, identified “regional priorities, including the post-Soviet space, European and North American spheres and Asia.” See “The President approved the Foreign Policy Concept for the Russian Federation,” *Kremlin.ru*, July 15, 2008, available at <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/news/2008/07/204132.shtml> (accessed September 16, 2011).

12. Jeffrey Mankoff gives a succinct explanation of this in his recent book on Russian foreign policy. See Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2009): 127–128. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline that was finally finished in 2006 posed a threat to Russian oil dominance. Coming from the Caspian through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, the line bypasses Russia altogether. In the South Ossetia War, reports showed that the Russian Air Force fired over 50 missiles around the area of the BTC line, never hitting it. This was could have been an intentional message, though Putin explicitly denied such an intention. See Damien McElroy, “Georgia: Russia targets key oil pipeline with over 50 missiles,” *Telegraph.co.uk*, August 10, 2008, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/georgia/2534767/Georgia-Russia-targets-key-oil-pipeline-with-over-50-missiles.html> (accessed September 20, 2011). Additionally, the proposed Nabucco natural gas pipeline, was originally set to begin production in 2010 and be completed by 2013, is seen as a direct threat to Gazprom’s dominance in the European natural gas markets. Though Angela Merkel recently blocked further investment in Nabucco and it is still under consideration. Several countries have and continue to invest in future stakes in it. For instance, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) recently began negotiations with Western firms on its contribution to its presumed eventual role in the project. Vladimir Socor, “Gas volumes from Iraq’s Kurdistan Region earmarked for the Nabucco project,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6, no. 96, May 19, 2009.

13. Richard Weitz, “Saakashvili-Bush Summit Faces Serious Obstacles,” *World Politics Review*, March 19, 2008. It is not clear to what extent South Ossetia and Abkhazia took part in this referendum.

14. Few mentioned the term *grand strategy*, but the message was clear: there was rehashing of Cold War-style fears that Russia was reviving the Soviet strategic view of the world. Vice President

Richard Cheney was quoted as saying that, “Russian aggression must not go unanswered.” See Julian E. Barnes and Peter Spiegel, “Fighting May Spark a New U.S. Policy Battle Over Russia,” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2008. In relation to the U.S. reaction to the supposed change in Russian policy, even a very level-headed former diplomat with much Russian experience, Strobe Talbot, stated that: “Outrage is not policy ... Even though outrage, worry and indignation are all appropriate in this situation, they shouldn’t be mistaken for policy and they shouldn’t be mistaken for strategy.” See Peter Baker, “U.S. Sees Much to Fear in a Hostile Russia,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 2008. And though this author would not disagree with Talbot’s assertion, the insinuation was clear that Russian policy had shifted so much so that it demanded an entirely new counter-strategy. Others mentioned that the U.S. and the EU must “prevent the Kremlin from achieving its strategic objective in Georgia.” Again, the assumption here is that Russia has returned to a grand strategy poised to a showdown with the West. See Lindsay Graham and Joe Lieberman, “Russia’s Aggression is a Challenge to World Order,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2008. Robert Kagan compared Russia’s invasion of Georgia with “Nazi Germany’s invasion of Czechoslovakia”—see Robert Kagan, “Putin Makes His Move,” *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2008.

15. See Mankoff, 2009, 258–260.

16. Others have mentioned Russian strategic objectives in the war. For instance see Janusz Bugajski, “Georgia: Epicenter of Strategic Confrontation,” Commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 12, 2008. Andrey S. Makarychev mentions that “In responding to the color revolutions ... Russia pursues two goals: to prevent the rise of anti-Russian regimes in neighboring states, and to block any possibility of projecting a color revolution into Russia.” See Andrey S. Makarychev, “Post-Soviet Realpolitik: Russian Policy After the Color Revolutions,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 4, March 2008. These goals are pragmatic but are only a fraction of the complete picture. Conversely, they are both offensive and defensive in nature and thus serve as perfect stepping stones for opening a larger set of objectives.

17. The Nabucco line would pass across the Caspian Sea, through Georgia and Turkey, bypassing Russia and undercutting Gazprom’s near monopoly on natural gas transport from Central Asia to Europe.

18. Dmitri Orlov, “The New Russian Age and Sovereign Democracy,” *Russian Politics and Law* 46, no. 5 (2009): 72–76.

19. Viktor Suvorov detailed an account of this in his book on the Soviet Army. See Suvorov, *Inside the Soviet Army* (New York: MacMillan, 1982): 6–7.

20. Pavel Baev, “Russia ‘Tandemocracy Stumbles into a War,’” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 11, 2008; also see Baev, “Russian Versus International Agendas at Geneva Discussions on Georgia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 6, 2001.

21. Anatol Lieven, “United Moscow,” *The National Interest*, September 2008, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/article/united-moscow-2866> (accessed September 20, 2011).

22. The term *siloviki* translates literally to the “forces of power.” It refers to a loosely and unofficially acknowledged group of current and former security service elites. Several items have been written on the influence of the security services elites in the era of Putin. Few seem to have a clear idea as to the degree of the *siloviki*’s influence—as any kind of coherent group—on decision-making and policy. Some believe the *siloviki* hold an overwhelming majority of the power in Moscow. Indeed, this model holds that the former KGB elites sought to reign in liberal reforms made in the wake of the post-Cold War, and especially the emergence of the Oligarchs, i.e., assuming a bunch of thieves constitute “liberalism,” i.e., mirror-imaging the American model of “liberalism.” See Ian Bremmer and Samuel Charap, “The Siloviki in Putin’s Russia: Who They Are and What They Want,” *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 1, 83–92; See also Alexander Litvinenko and Yuri Felshtinsky’s book, which was banned in Russia and which was said to be a direct cause of Litvinenko’s assassination by Russian intelligence. See Alexander Litvinenko and Yuri Felshtinsky, *Blowing Up Russia* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007).

23. At the tactical and operational levels, this is also called the “maskirovka,” which is Russian for “masquerade.” This is a term used at times in the history of Russian intelligence, dating back to the Bolshevik chekists. As one Cold War-era book on the subject of Soviet strategic deception put it, “The interrelation of surprise and deception recur; surprise removes an enemy’s capacity to strike back.” Leon Sloss, “Impact of Deception on U.S. Nuclear Strategy,” in Brian D. Daily and Patrick

J. Parker, *Soviet Strategic Deception* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books and Hoover Institution Press, 1987): 440.

24. Alexander Darchiev, "We Have No Plans To Invade," *USA Today*, August 12, 2008.

25. Mikhail Barabonov, "Reform of the Combat Spirit," *Kommersant-Vlast*, October 20, 2008; also see "Russian Military to be Fully Rearmed by 2020," *RIA Novosti*, November 19, 2008.

26. Roger N. McDermott, "Russia's Conventional Armed Forces and the Georgian War," *Parameters*, Spring 2009; also see McDermott, "Russia's Lesson's From Georgia War: Impact on Military Reform Plans," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, November 12, 2008.

27. Roger N. McDermott, "Russia's Armed Forces Undergoing 'Unparalleled Transformation,'" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 13, 2009, available at [http://www.rferl.org/content/Russias\\_Armed\\_Forces\\_Undergoing\\_Fundamental\\_Transformation/1798944.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Russias_Armed_Forces_Undergoing_Fundamental_Transformation/1798944.html) (accessed September 20, 2011).

28. Jonas Bernstein, "Leading Political Scientist Administers Last Rites To Reform Hopes," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5, no. 176, September 15, 2008.

29. Though US policy following the conflict was not to give military aid, economic and intelligence support aided Georgia to rebuild overall capacity.

30. Indeed, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in its meeting shortly after the conflict, was less than enthusiastic about supporting Russia's side. Meetings of the NATO-Russia council were suspended indefinitely, but then resumed in March 2009.

31. William E. Pomeranz, "President Medvedev and the Contested Constitutional Underpinnings of Russia's Power Vertical," *Demokratizatsiya* 17, no. 2, 172–192.

32. Ellen Barry, "Stung By Criticism Over Georgia, Putin Asks West For a Little Understanding," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2008.

33. Clifford J. Levy, "Russia Vows to Support Two Enclaves, in Retort to Bush," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2008.

34. Sergei Lavrov, "Why Russia's Response To Georgia Was Right," *Financial Times*, August 13, 2008.

35. Sergei Lavrov, "America Must Choose Between Georgia and Russia," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 20, 2008.

36. Originally, tensions "date back to the 1920s, when South Ossetia made abortive attempts to declare its independence but ended up as an autonomous region within Soviet Georgia after the Red Army conquered Georgia." See Nichol, 2008, 1.

37. Daniel Burghart has written on this subject. See Daniel L. Burghart. "Thorns Among the Roses: Is the Revolution in Georgia a Model for the Rest of the Caucasus?," *Defense Intelligence Journal* 15, no. 1, 55–67.

38. In a recent interview, when asked about the next era in US-Russian relations and the issues that remained non-negotiable, Putin replied: "What is non-negotiable is any infringement on our sovereignty. This is not something that can be discussed with other states." This is an indication that Putin is concerned about Russia's sovereignty—an odd statement in light of the charge that Russia violated Georgia's sovereignty. See "Putin Mulls Over Modern Financial Crisis while reading Russian History," interview with Bloomberg News, January 27, 2009, available at <http://rt.com/politics/official-word/putin-mulls-modern-financial-crisis-reading-russian-history/> (accessed September 20, 2011).

49. Vladimir Socor, "Russia's Economic and Political Warfare Failing to Subdue Georgia," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 3, no. 186.

40. "UNOMIG Report on Koori Attack," *Caucas Europe News* (Abkhazia Newline), July 13, 2007.

41. See Pavel K. Baev's paper on the Kosovo as the precedent in which he predicted Georgia to be the only likely candidate for military intervention by Russian. Pavel Baev, "The 'Kosovo Precedent' and Russian-Georgian Relations," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 5, Project on New Approaches to Russian Security, March 2008. Additionally, then-First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov was quoted at the Munich Conference on Security in February 2008 as saying "If it comes to unilateral recognition of Kosovo, that will be a precedent that will definitely be beyond international law and that will be something close to opening a Pandora's box." See "Where is

Russia heading? New Vision of Pan-European Security,” Munich Conference on Security Policy, February 10, 2008.

42. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2008. “Bucharest Summit Declaration: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008,” (Communiqué point 23). As the issue was again raised at the December 2008 meeting of NATO foreign ministers, it was again denied. The issue was not raised at the April 2009 NATO conference. The crisis was resolved, but the effect—both in Moscow and in Kyiv—was felt. The long-term effectiveness of energy as a perceived weapon is problematic—Gazprom, Russia’s natural gas monopoly, experienced several billions of dollars in losses as a result of this disruption. Thus, its effectiveness is limited to its own ability and desire to go without market access and continued profits.

43. See Andrey S. Makarychev, “NATO and Russia After the Bucharest Summit,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 19, August 2008.

44. See “Putin’s Instruction Re Abkhazia, S Ossetia to Lead to Breakthrough,” *Itar-Tass*, April 16, 2008; “Putin Orders Creation of Mechanism to Protect Russians in Abkhazia, S Ossetia,” *Moscow Interfax*, April 16, 2008; and “Georgia Slams Russia’s Policy on Abkhazia, S. Ossetia,” *Moscow Interfax*, April 16, 2008.

45. Darya Yuryeva, “Russia: Georgia Criticized for Accusing RF of Using MiG To Shoot Down UAV,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, April 23, 2008.

46. Vladimir Socor, “Russia Doubling its Troops in Georgia’s Abkhazia Region,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5, no. 85, May 5, 2008.

47. Svante E. Cornell, Johanna Popjanevski et. al, 2008, 10.

48. “Georgia protests against ‘annexation’ of Abkhazia by Russia,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus Unit, June 2, 2008.

49. “MP says Georgia should be grateful to Russia for railway troops work in Abkhazia,” *Interfax*, June 3, 2008.

50. “Georgian Officials Say Russia Behind Blasts in Conflict Zone,” *Kavkaz-Press*, July 6, 2008.

51. “Russian ‘source’ Declines Comment on Georgian claims of Abkhazia Arms Supplies,” *Interfax*, July 6, 2008. See also “Sukhumi Says Russia Delivered No Arms to Abkhazia,” *Interfax*, July 6, 2008.

52. “Tbilisi Claims Large Batch of Russian Weapons Delivered to Abkhazia,” *Interfax*, July 6, 2008.

53. “Georgia says it Killed Four in Kodori Clash, Suspects Russia,” Rustavi-2 Television, July 9, 2008.

54. “EU Raises Georgia Airspace Violation with Russia,” *Civil Georgia*, July 12, 2008.

55. “Germany: Georgian President Discusses Regional Conflicts, Role of Russia,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, July 14, 2008.

56. Ruslan Khestanov and Igor Grebtsov, “Russian, NATO Exercises Reflect Uneasy Security in South Russia,” *Russkiy Reporter*, July 24, 2008.

57. Jim Nichol, “Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests,” 2008, 3.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Indeed, Russia holds a similar exercise in this area yearly.

60. Yevgeniy Shestakov, “‘Escalation’ in South Ossetia Seen; Change in Russia’s Neutral Position Possible,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, August 5, 2008; and Marina Perevozkina, “Abkhazia Said Prepared to Open ‘Second Front’ in Event of War in S. Ossetia,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, August 5, 2008.

61. *Ibid.*

62. C. J. Chivers and Ellen Barry, “Georgia Claims on Russia War Called Into Question,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/world/europe/07georgia.html> (accessed September 20, 2011). Also see “Heavy fighting in South Ossetia,” *BBC News*, August 8, 2008, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7546639.stm> (accessed September 20, 2011).

63. “Russian MPs back Georgia’s rebels,” *BBC News*, August 25, 2008; and “Russia recognized

the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia,” *Azerbaijan Business Centre*, August 26, 2008.

64. “Russia’s intelligence paves the way to war,” *Jane’s Intelligence Digest*, August 20, 2008.

65. For example, Tskhinvali is approximately 106 kilometers from Vladikavkaz by air, where several thousands of Russian troops were located.

66. C.J. Chivers, “Georgia Offers Fresh Evidence On War’s Start,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 2008.

67. Peter Finn, “A Two-Sided Descent Into Full-Scale War,” *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2008.

68. Ibid; C. J. Chivers and Ellen Barry, “Georgia Claims on Russia War Called Into Question,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2008.

69. Vladimir Yermolin, “Prospect of Medals for Ossetia Intelligence Failings Derided,” *Gрани.ru*, August 13, 2008.

70. Andrey Soldatov, “Russian, Georgian Intelligence Efforts Analyzed,” *Yezhednevnyy Zhurnal*, August 13, 2008.

71. Anne Barnard and Ellen Barry, “Georgia Says Russian Troops Still Fighting Despite Accord,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2008.

72. This policy was communicated by Putin in April following the Bucharest Summit, and again officially when Medvedev laid out the five principles of foreign policy in August.

73. The fact that the Georgian government released the intercept more than a month later remains partly suspicious. Conversely, there is no evidence to refute its validity, or to deny the possibility that intelligence officials were holding on to it as a damning piece of evidence.

74. There was some indication in the middle of the war that Saakashvili actually thought NATO might deliver reinforcements. In at least two well-placed opinion pieces, he maintained that the war was indeed a war for the sake of the West—identifying “The West” with “NATO.” See Mikheil Saakashvili, “The War in Georgia is a War for the West,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2008; and Saakashvili, “Russia’s War is the West’s Challenge,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2008. There was also some indication later that this message in fact trumpeted to the Georgian population. See Jeffrey Stinson, “Georgians Hope U.S. Will Help Defend Way of Life,” *USA Today*, August 19, 2008.

75. “Matthew Bryza: “Mikhail Saakashvili’s decision to deploy troops in South Ossetia was a wrong step,” *Azeri-Press Agency*, September 11, 2008.

76. Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Tells the World, ‘Don’t Tread on Me!’,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 11, 2008.

77. David Ignatius, “Caution Over Confrontation,” *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2008.

78. “Russia Lost Seven Aircraft to Georgian Air Defense System,” *Izvestiya.Ru*, September 12, 2008.

79. Vladimir Socor, “Caspian oil transport corridor is returning to normal after Georgia-Russian war,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5, no. 186, September 29, 2008.

80. Jim Nichol, “Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implication for U.S. Interests,” CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, August 13, 2008, 6; also see Oleg Shchedrov and Maria Golovnina, “Russian navy arrives at Georgia sea border-media,” *Reuters*, August 10, 2008.

81. The Sarkozy agreement maintained six main points including the following: 1. “no resort to force”; 2. “permanent cessation of hostilities”; 3. “free access for humanitarian assistance and permission for refugees to return”; 4. that “Georgian troops are to return to the places of their regular stationing”; 5. Russian forces shall withdraw to the positions prior to the start of hostilities”; and 6. “recognition of independence and sovereignty.” See Vladimir Socor, “Russia Nullifies French-Brokered Armistice in Georgia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5, no. 159. On withdrawal and further creation of buffer zones, one news report mentioned the “ambiguity about who tells who what village to occupy, and how far their patrols are supposed to go.” See Charles Clover, “Kremlin’s Grip on Troops Tested,” *The Financial Times*, September 2, 2008.

82. Hence, there was surprise in response to the so-called “general’s rebellion” of 2008. This occurred again in 2009 when Serdyukov cut funding to GRU. Both were surprises in that they were displayed of high-level insubordination. In the 2008 incident, General Balulevsky was removed as Chief of the General Staff and sidelined by Putin to the Security Council.

83. US officials indicated at the time, that Georgia would receive no military assistance from the United States. It is not clear whether this included intelligence support, such as C4ISR technology.

84. Reuters, "U.S. Troops Start Training Exercise in Georgia," July 15, 2008; and Bill Gertz, "Russians Seized U.S. Equipment," *The Washington Times*, September 9, 2008.

85 "Russia's Consumption-Driven Inflation: Will It All End In Tears?," *Russia Economy Watch*, July 7, 2008.

86. Cornell and Starr, eds., *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*; and Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

87. Defense Minister Serdyukov fired General Yuri Baluyevsky, as Chief of General Staff, in June 2008.

88. Wynne Russell, "Russian Relations with the 'Near Abroad,'" in Peter Shearman, ed., *Russian Foreign Policy Since 1990* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995): 63–67.

89. The "power vertical" is considered the structural operationalization of the Putin concept of Russian governance, by which several laws were enacted to support a unified system of executive power. See William E. Pomeranz, 2009, 172–92.