

August 2022

Who Sent the Devil Down to Georgia? An Analysis of the Causes of the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and its Effects on Georgian Democracy

Kris Bohnenstiehl
University of Puget Sound

Follow this and additional works at: <https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/thecommons>



Part of the [Comparative Politics Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bohnenstiehl, Kris (2022) "Who Sent the Devil Down to Georgia? An Analysis of the Causes of the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and its Effects on Georgian Democracy," *The Commons: Puget Sound Journal of Politics*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/thecommons/vol3/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Commons: Puget Sound Journal of Politics by an authorized editor of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.

WHO SENT THE DEVIL DOWN TO GEORGIA?

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES OF THE RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR
OF 2008 AND ITS EFFECTS ON GEORGIAN DEMOCRACY

KRIS BOHNENSTIEHL

GEORGIA: GOD'S COUNTRY

In the beginning, when God created the world, He set aside pieces of land for the different people who would live on the new Earth. When he had finished, all the nations of the world had a place to call their home, save one. The Georgians had been celebrating the night before, and in their stupor had missed the opportunity to claim a land of their own. Desperate, they came to God and cried, "Oh Lord, last night we were feasting and celebrating in your name, our great revelries made us oversleep and now we are without a home." Taking pity on them, God gave the Georgians the piece of land which He had been saving for His own pleasure, stating that only His most devoted followers should live in such a paradise. This popular myth marks the beginning of nearly every conversation of Georgian history, for God's favorite people have since failed to prosper in their slice of paradise.

The origins of the Nation of Georgia have less of a divine provenance. After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following the first World War, a Georgian state emerged in 1918. However, by 1921 it had been swallowed by the ravenous Soviets and amalgamated into their Union. The birthplace of Joseph Stalin, Georgia remained firmly in the grip of the U.S.S.R. until its independence in 1991, under nationalist President Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Gamsakhurdia's very short reign was characterized by conflict with the breakaway territories of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Adjara, each of which officially existed within the official territorial boundaries of Georgia but had been governed separately of Georgia as independent *oblasts* under the Soviet Union. When Georgia declared independence in 1991 and centered its power in the capital of Tbilisi, these territories rejected Georgian authority. Territory elites remained desperate to cling onto the power they had held for so long and disliked the prospect of losing their close and shady economic ties to Russia.

In late 1991, Gamsakhurdia was deposed due to his grating nationalism-edging-on-fascism, and Eduard Shevardnadze took over as president. Shevardnadze had been the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1985 until the Union's collapse in 1991, and brought with him many old practices of governance. Corruption was rampant in Georgia, as Shevardnadze used both the police force and a highly clientelistic system to dictate his will. He revamped the power of the central state, which had been exceedingly weak

under Gamsakhurdia.¹ From 1991 to 1995, Georgian GDP dropped by 130%, and the bustling black-market economy only further undermined what little authority the government had, with people promoted to prominent positions through their willingness to maintain the status quo and maximize profits for those in command.²

In 2003, Shevardnadze won reelection to the presidency in an election that was obviously rigged, and the Georgian people had had enough. In what has since been coined the Rose Revolution, protesters broke into the parliament building during Shevardnadze's acceptance speech armed only with roses, causing the President to flee and declare a state of emergency. Shevardnadze eventually stepped down, and in a hastily organized election, Mikheil Saakashvili was elected to the post of president with 96% of the vote, in what the OSCE called "the most fair elections since [Georgia's] independence."³ Elected on promises of liberalization to combat corruption, integration into NATO and the European Union, and territorial unification with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Saakashvili enjoyed significant support not just from many Georgians, but the United States and its allies as well. Eager to expand east and undercut the returning influence of Russia in the region, the Western allies saw Saakashvili as the perfect vessel to spread the values and institutions of the liberal democratic world into the post-Soviet space.

This optimism was short-lived, for although Saakashvili made good on many of his promises to combat corruption and improve the economic conditions for Georgians, he began demonstrating many authoritarian qualities that severely hurt his reputation and reception. Many Georgians remained dissatisfied with the lack of plurality in their government, and Saakashvili actively worked to silence oppositional voices, using media censorship to great effect. And while Saakashvili had managed to reform the police force and educational system to combat corruption, the Georgian people still lived in extreme poverty. In 2007, a protest of 50,000 in Tbilisi was dispersed by riot police, yet Saakashvili declared that the protest marked the beginning of a new democratic society in Georgia. Despite this paradoxical view, Saakashvili won reelection in 2008 in a race declared not particularly fair by the OSCE. This victory was undercut by a short war with Russia in August 2008, which doomed Saakashvili's domestic and international support. Paralyzed by his diminished popularity and humiliated by the ease with which Russia had defeated his nation, Saakashvili oversaw an ineffective administration until he lost the election in 2012 to Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream Party, who received significant Western backing.

FALSE TRUTHS

The aim of this paper is to examine the degree to which Mikhail Saakashvili was responsible for the August 2008 war, and to determine the role which this loss played in his diminishing popularity and eventual electoral defeat. Before getting too far ahead, it must be known that the war between

Bohnenstiehl: Who Sent the Devil Down to Georgia?

Russia and Georgia remains one of the most prominent wars of disinformation and deception in modern history, and accurate facts from the conflict are difficult to find due to the highly biased and often deliberately misleading reporting from both sides of the conflict. Since 2008, Russia has taken the upper hand in this war of information and has effectively spread the narrative that Saakashvili and Georgia were the aggressors of the war, while Russia only acted in the interest of protecting its citizens from illegal Georgian attacks. However as more information about the conflict has worked its way through the net of propaganda, Russia's narrative appears increasingly inaccurate. As Russian poet Lev Rubinstein argues:

[Russia] clearly recognizes the new information-technology situation in the country and in the world, counting only on deceiving those who are glad to be deceived. Such people, to the great joy [of the current Russian government] are extremely numerous. What about those who "do not believe" the official line? They do not believe and it is not necessary that they do — let them sit at home and not come to our circus.⁴

From his first moments as Georgian President, Saakashvili made himself a target of Russian attacks. His policies of Western integration and his professed love for liberalism were directly inimical to the goals of the Russian government seeking to reestablish its Cold War sphere of influence over the region. Saakashvili's turn to the West and dreams of integration into NATO and the EU represented a threat to Russian hegemony and security, paramount issues under Vladimir Putin's reformed Russian ideology.⁵ The materialization of Russia's fears was the high level of support and close personal relationships Saakashvili had with his Western counterparts, a relationship which both Putin and Saakashvili believed would guarantee Georgia's entrance into NATO and exit from being in Russia's shadow. This confidence would result in catastrophe for Saakashvili, as he began to exhibit significant authoritarian tendencies, believing the West would unequivocally support his drive to liberalize the country, which was not the case. By 2008, Saakashvili's Western support had nearly dissipated; yet faced with increasing Russian aggression, he continued to act with rash confidence based upon a belief that the West would intervene and force Russia to back off before actual conflict erupted. While Russian propaganda paints Saakashvili as aggressively pursuing military solutions for reunification with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he actually made significant and concentrated efforts at peaceful reunification, which were rejected numerous times by the puppet governments of the territories acting at the will of a war-eager Russia. Although Saakashvili was foolish to escalate the conflict through military mobilization, he was acting reactively to Russian aggression and the West's failure to support him. The United States bears significant responsibility for the outbreak of war, since a lack of concrete foreign policy around Russia froze its intelligence response,

leaving the country unable to stop the conflict until it was too late.

Saakashvili's dramatic loss of popularity both domestically and abroad can be traced to his trends towards authoritarianism in the quest to liberalize Georgia, not his aggressive actions which led to war, as Russian propaganda would have it. Since 2008, the Georgian people have only increased their support for Western integration through membership with NATO and the EU, demonstrating that the people, and the West, were not dissatisfied with his policies, but rather his procedures.

RUSSIAN POLICY LEADING TO WAR

For those who wanted to see it, war between Russia and Georgia was certain by April of 2008, and Russian policy reflected this readiness. By November 2007, Russia had withdrawn all of its troops from its bases in Georgian territory in preparation for war.⁶ While this seemed like a step towards easing tensions between the two countries, Russian officials worried that when the war broke out many Russian soldiers would be trapped in these bases, so they moved them out to be redeployed for the possible invasion. Not long after, Russia withdrew from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in early 2008, allowing for overt Russian military presence in Abkhazia and Ossetia, which CIS decreed could only be occupied by Georgian troops.⁷ This was an overt violation of Georgian territorial integrity by Russian forces, and as Russian "Peacekeepers" began selling arms and training local militias in the region, it became clear that peace was not the priority for Moscow.

The most consequential event in the chain that led to war, however, was created neither by Georgia nor Russia. In April 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, the Western powers recognized Kosovo as an independent state and, in the same meeting, laid out a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia. While this plan seemed beneficial for Georgia, it set the course straight to conflict for both Georgia and Russia, as the West failed to understand the issue in full. As a part of the MAP, Georgia had to resolve all territorial conflicts before it could be considered for NATO membership, and Angela Merkle stated that: "Nations undergoing regional and internal conflicts cannot become NATO members."⁸ These were opportune circumstances for Russia, as it now held the cards for Georgia's Western integration--not a hand to fold on. Russia's deep-seated influence over the governments of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia guaranteed that the fate of the territories would be decided by Russia, and since that fate determined Georgia's future of integration, Russia had the means to prevent NATO membership. Saakashvili was forced to decide between violent reunification and war with Russia, or consignment of the status quo and surrender of the dream of joining the West. Knowing that conflict was likely coming, Russia increased its military presence on the border and in the territories, undertaking significant military drills to simulate the coming war.⁹ Likewise, Georgia began conducting similar drills, a foolish decision to play Russia by their word and create the possibility for a

Bohnenstiehl: Who Sent the Devil Down to Georgia?

narrative of Georgian planned aggression. In July, Russia began sending state-sponsored journalists to embed themselves in the areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia most likely to see conflict, so that they would have the lead in the propaganda war which was to break out in conjunction with the actual fighting.¹⁰ Foreign journalists were banned from the area, ensuring Russia would have a complete monopoly on the coverage, and guaranteeing control of the narrative.¹¹ Thus by summer of 2008, both sides were preparing for the certain eventuality of war.

While there is concrete evidence that the Russian Government planned for war as early as November of 2007, if war with Georgia was always the goal of Moscow, then evidence shows that Russia had undertaken calculated policies to force Georgia into war as early as 2002. Due to the Soviet Union's policy of affirmative action, the Abkhazians and Ossetians represented a population minority yet were the elite majority in the respective territories compared to the Georgians.¹² By 2001, there existed significant support for reintegration with Georgia, particularly in South Ossetia, and the issue might have been decided in the elections of 2001 where some leading presidential candidates wanted to rejoin Georgia.¹³ However Russia remained the dominant force both economically and politically, supplying between 90 and 98 percent of South Ossetia's GDP between 2001 and 2008.¹⁴ Russia backed the eventual winner Eduard Kokoity, a fervent separatist who made peaceful unification with Georgia all but impossible while he was in power.¹⁵ Thus Russia passed up on an opportunity to peacefully resolve one half of the conflict, pointing towards a desire to stoke war. Guarantees of military support between Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2006 represent another policy decision puppeteered by Russia to stoke potential conflict. In 2007, in what is known as the Munich Speech, Vladimir Putin made Russia's position on Georgia clear: "Georgia may join NATO, but without Ossetia and Abkhazia," declared Putin, knowing full well he held the key to Georgian integration.¹⁶ At the same time, he expressed a desire to "make an example out of Georgia [and Saakashvili]."¹⁷

THE EXAMPLE OF SAAKASHVILI

Aside from the brewing border conflict, Putin and Russia had ample reasons for disliking Mikheil Saakashvili. Putin's desire to re-establish Russia as the hegemonic power in the region was directly threatened by Saakashvili's desire to join NATO and extend Western influence. Therefore, conflict between the two was likely from the moment Saakashvili was elected president, and Abkhazia and Ossetia were welcome catalysts to instigate such a battle. The Rose Revolution saw Saakashvili win the presidency with overwhelming support and marked a dramatic shift from the status quo in the post-Soviet landscape, and Georgia took it upon itself to market this revolution as a break with the past and an embracement of modernity and democracy. The initial years of Saakashvili's tenure were indeed proof that such optimism

was taking hold; Georgia's GDP increased by 10% annually from 2004-08, and there was hope that Georgia's newfound economic strength would provide an inherent solution to the issue of territorial integrity, as Ossetia and Abkhazia might have wanted to join in on the prosperity.¹⁸ However, military incursions into Ossetia to combat the rampant smuggling paralyzing the economy stoked fears of a military takeover, and peaceful integration grew less likely as time passed.¹⁹

On the domestic front, Saakashvili's popularity was beginning to decline by 2006, as he began to exhibit characteristics of an authoritarian leader in his frustration to accomplish his goals. Simultaneously, many of his economic reforms were not working as promised, and unemployment and poverty remained significant issues. While the police were no longer shaking down people for bribes, the people were just as poor, and thus the circumstances remained somewhat unchanged.²⁰ Meanwhile, Saakashvili began to increase executive power and decrease the plurality of the government and society. His party, known as the United National Movement (UNM), achieved dominance over parliament in elections in which significant voter suppression and double counting was reported, and oppositional voices in the media were gradually silenced to supplement this effort.²¹ While initially the United States unequivocally supported Saakashvili in his efforts to liberalize Georgian society, news of these authoritarian tendencies gradually lessened Western support. Yet Saakashvili seemed unaware that his position as a favorite of the West was in jeopardy. In flashes of Realpolitik, Saakashvili seemed to demonstrate the desire to liberalize and democratize Georgia through very undemocratic means.

While the subversion of democratic checks rightly deserves general condemnation, it is worth considering the difficulty of Saakashvili's position. When Saakashvili took power in 2004, Georgia was very much the economic and societal basket case Russia had promoted it as through excessive propaganda. Corruption and clientelism prevented any substantive cooperation between the already ineffective branches of government, and an absence of foreign direct investment prevented the establishment of constructive institutions able to promote any kind of democratic transition. If Georgia were a car, it was without an engine or any wheels, but the incompetent driver continued to feed it fuel. When Saakashvili took over, the car got a new driver, but remained in its dilapidated state. His promises of liberalization and a commitment to democracy sounded good to the desperate Georgians; however, nobody had any conception of what a liberal democratic society looked like nor how to achieve it. Saakashvili inherited a country with totally ineffective institutions and bureaucracy and promised to magically make it function. His failure, while tragic, was entirely expected. Above all, Saakashvili's presidency begs the question as to whether institutional cooperation is a natural prerequisite to a democratic society or not. How can a democracy, with its various checks and balances, operate without united

Bohnenstiehl: Who Sent the Devil Down to Georgia?

collaboration between its various institutions? Saakashvili was clearly confounded by this question, and eventually settled on establishing that cooperation first (albeit very one-sided cooperation) and leaving democratization to fill in the gaps.

This calculation demonstrates that Saakashvili believed he had the unequivocal support of the West, and that the United States and its allies were firmly committed to his vision for Georgia. Operating on this belief, he severely overreached his power, and by the time his mistake had been realized, it was too late for Georgia.²² While the Bucharest Summit did promise some military aid for Georgia, the requirement of territorial unification put Saakashvili in an unavoidable course for war with Russia, and the rejection of immediate NATO membership meant that Georgia was without the security guarantees necessary to achieve that goal. Therefore, while Saakashvili's policy to dramatically increase Georgian military spending was flagged by the alarmist Russian media as an aggressive buildup, he was forced into this position to protect his country from a threat no one else was taking seriously. Officially this buildup was promoted in order to meet the entry requirements for NATO, but this is not an accurate representation of what really happened. Since NATO demanded the territorial reunification of Georgia, the country needed to ramp up its military both in order to achieve the unification and to protect itself from a response from Russia, who had overtly expressed its intention to support Abkhazia and Ossetia with military force.²³ Saakashvili was very foolish to mobilize and give Russia the excuse to act "defensively"; however if the threat from Russia was as genuine as it seemed and the West had continued to act recalcitrantly to the possibility of violence, mobilization may well have been necessary to avoid national martyrdom at the hands of Russia.

Strangely enough, it was Saakashvili's commitment to democracy that led to this disaster, not his authoritarian tendencies. Saakashvili's popularity and legitimacy rested on his ability to make good on his campaign promises, of which territorial unification was paramount. While he did not make things particularly easy for himself by pursuing the centralization of authority in the state, the dilapidated condition of the Georgian government and society did not provide an enabling base from which to start. While the leadup to the war and events during it worked to amplify his authoritarian tendencies, these trends did not directly lead to the conflict. It is however worth considering that with greater democratic oversight and plurality the decision to mobilize the Georgian military might have been undertaken with more care, and Georgia might have seen greater support from the West. While Saakashvili was a fool, he should not be considered the main aggressor of the war with Russia. Rather, Saakashvili was trapped by the hawkish opportunism of Russia already plotting his downfall and the irresponsible policies of the West. While the details of how the fighting broke out is hazy due to the vastly varying accounts from the media on both sides, strong evidence points to Russia as having fired the first shot; it was unequivocally Russia, not Georgia, who

violated international law, first by illegally staging troops in Ossetia and later by advancing into Georgia and violating the small nation's sovereign right to territorial integrity.²⁴

RECALCITRANCE

Throughout this discussion of Russian and Georgian policies, the United States and its European allies played a pivotal role. By 2008, NATO had worked hard to establish itself as a fair arbiter of international and border conflicts, raising questions as to why it failed to prevent war from breaking out between Russia and one of its prospective members.²⁵ When Saakashvili was elected to the presidency in 2004, the West rejoiced. A figure had finally emerged in a post-Soviet territory who was willing to bring his country out of the dark and into the modern world. The support from the West likely influenced Saakashvili's overwhelming electoral victory in 2004, and was crucial to his initial success. Successful integration with the West required relentless support, and thus for Saakashvili to make any progress, he had to present himself as desirable to his Western counterparts. He was remarkably successful at this rebranding of Georgia's break from its past, and the West responded by throwing unequivocal support behind him and his policies. But by 2006, much of the fervor surrounding Saakashvili had worn thin, and many in the West were beginning to have second thoughts as they observed his efforts to reduce Georgia's political plurality and the ineffectiveness of his economic reform policies. However, the intimately personal relationship which Saakashvili had formed with his Western allies meant they were hesitant to reign in his authoritarian tendencies, further emboldening Saakashvili to continue on the course that he had set.²⁶ The failure to implement effective oversight and restraint on Saakashvili is not the apex of the West's failure to mitigate this conflict; however, it does indicate an underlying issue facing America and its allies. There was no comprehensive policy strategy to deal with the increasing threat posed by Russia, and the West was terribly ignorant of the developments taking place in Georgia and the Caucasus in general. Rather than supporting the institutionalization of democracy and liberalization in Georgia, the West threw its support behind the individual that they believed would achieve these goals, without taking the necessary steps to understand the scope of the issue which was Georgia's Western integration.

The first great failure of the West was to confuse the cause and effect of Georgian-Western integration. In the early 2000s, Russia launched a horribly violent war on its own breakaway region in the Caucasus: Chechnya. Despite Chechen wishes to be independent of Russia, Putin took drastic actions to quash the uprising, all but leveling the capital of Grozny and leaving just 20,000 inhabitants of its pre-war population of around 400,000.²⁷ Putin seemingly believed that Russia still had the right to interfere in ethnic and national conflicts within the perceived sphere of Russian influence, a behavior

Bohnenstiehl: Who Sent the Devil Down to Georgia?

mirrored in the war with Georgia, the secession of Crimea, and just recently in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While at the very least the war in Chechnya should have demonstrated to Western allies that Russia was willing to embroil itself in violent ethnic conflict, there are greater considerations to make regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If Russia was willing to quell calls for national self-determination within its own official borders, how could it legitimately support the demand for independence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

The West missed this paradox, and subsequently missed the mark when Georgia came forward with the desire to join NATO and integrate into Europe, as evidenced by the conflicting requirements laid out in Georgia's MAP. The MAP demanded that Georgia achieve territorial hegemony, showing that NATO did not comprehend the source of the issue. It seems that the West was willing to take Russia at its word that the territorial integrity of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were important in and of themselves. NATO completely failed to see that the real reason that Russia was interested in the status of these territories was that their destabilization precluded Georgia from NATO membership.²⁸ After the suppression of Chechen independence, Russian hypocrisy was on full display, and it is confounding that the United States and its allies did not notice that logical fallacy. If the West had been intent on allowing Georgia to join NATO in 2008, the logical course would be to streamline their membership and utilize this new alliance to deal with the territorial conflict after the fact. Had this option been pursued, Russia would have lost the leverage that it had on Georgia. Russia's primary goal was to keep Georgia out of NATO, and its strong influence over Abkhazia and South Ossetia prevented such integration, making it its most effective weapon. Consequently, Georgia's call for help fell on deaf ears.

Further evidence of Western ignorance was made clear at the same NATO summit in Bucharest that produced Georgia's MAP: the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state. The independence of Kosovo made sense in the isolated context of the Balkans; however, wider geo-political consequences existed and seemingly were not considered by the West. The United States wished to use its newly gained strength post-Cold War to impose its will; however, despite U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's confident statement that "Kosovo cannot be seen as a precedent for any other situation in the world today," Russia certainly did not agree.²⁹ Kosovo provided Russia with two weapons to use against Georgia. First it represented the very threat of Western expansion which had galvanized Russia's policy to prevent Georgian integration. NATO was flexing its jurisdiction in a territory which historically had operated in the Russian sphere of influence, which allowed Putin to further his narrative of acting defensively in Russia's interest. Second, it allowed Russia to declare its support for the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by using the same precedence of national self-determination which had influenced the West's decision about Kosovo. While Western

observers might have noted that Russia's actions in Chechnya belied the sincerity of this declaration, it slipped by unnoticed. The West seemed to take Russia at their word, and Russian policy continued to find success while characteristically subverting rational logic.

The final failure of the West was its willingness to swallow Russian propaganda. The culmination of the short war was due to a Western willingness to believe Russia's reasoning behind the war and its reporting on what had happened during the conflict. Both Russia and Georgia had treated the Information War, which shrouded the on-the-ground conflict, as equally important as the actual fighting.³⁰ The widespread policy of the Western powers regarding the war had been to wait for reliable information to emerge after fighting broke out.³¹ While on the one hand this shows that the West lacked a comprehensive plan from the beginning to deal with an eventual conflict, it also shows why many people were so susceptible to obvious propaganda.

Russian propaganda outlets relentlessly plugged the narrative that Saakashvili and Georgia were the aggressors in the war and had violated the CIS arrangements first, Russia was acting to protect its citizens in the territories and that, given the precedent set by Kosovo, self-determination overruled claims of territorial integrity.³² Georgia also forwarded its own narrative through the media, claiming that it was Russia who had violated international law by attacking sovereign Georgia and CIS arrangements made Georgian peacekeeping forces in the territories legal, since they still lay within Georgia and not Russian jurisdiction.³³ Georgia also denied that Russia was protecting its citizens, claiming correctly that Russia had issued illegal passports to people living in Ossetia and Abkhazia and had ignored Georgian sovereignty.³⁴ While both sides are guilty of spreading disinformation, Georgia had an accurate view of proceedings on these two points. Yet this was not accepted as the narrative in the rest of Europe.

Several factors might have led to the promotion of the Russian narrative over Georgia's. First, bolstered by the victory in the armed conflict, Russia remained committed to spreading its story long after the war had ended and thus might have simply overwhelmed Georgia's attempts, which managed to keep pace during the war but fell off once fighting had concluded.³⁵ Second, Georgia's methods during the Information War worked to delegitimize their claims in the eyes of the democratic West. Saakashvili's policy in the information campaign was to act defensively, and nearly all Russian media outlets were banned in Georgia, severely damaging its reputation as an open-democratic society.³⁶

Finally, when all was said and done, Europe realized that defying Russia's will would have repercussions. Above all was Europe's growing reliance on the Russian state-owned natural gas giant Gazprom, which supplies over 40% of the EU's energy products.³⁷ This was probably foremost on the minds of the

Bohnenstiehl: Who Sent the Devil Down to Georgia?

German government when they came out officially in support of Russia's version of events.³⁸ The German argument was that Georgia had acted as the aggressor in the conflict, since the peacekeeping provisions in the region precluded the stationing of armed troops in the area, which Georgia apparently violated in 2006.³⁹ Due to this violation, Russia was justified to “expel” the Georgians who were cast as invaders, and subsequent attacks by Georgians on Russian peacekeeping forces justified the escalation.⁴⁰

This line of justification is in line with the rhetoric spread by Russian propaganda and was not reified by the facts on the ground. As stated earlier, Georgia still maintained sovereignty over Ossetia and Abkhazia, and was legally justified to deploy troops there. Germany's argument ignores the successive provocative Russian attacks which led up to the war, including the bombing of Georgian towns by Russian planes in 2006 and 2007.⁴¹ Finally, it fails to recognize that Russia blatantly violated international law when the war broke out, going beyond protecting its citizens by advancing into uncontested Georgian territory and ignoring Georgia's rights as a sovereign state.⁴² Saakashvili was foolish to move Georgian troops into position for a war and create the pretext for Russia to be “defensive”; however given that it was Germany's own leader Angela Merkel who had expressed the need for Georgia to find a solution to its border conflict, this seems to be an unfair double standard for Saakashvili.

THE WAR'S EFFECT ON GEORGIAN DEMOCRACY

Saakashvili had just won another term as Georgian President when the August War kicked off in 2008, and his loss of popularity by the time of his eventual electoral defeat in 2012 was substantial. However, the chain of events that preceded the war, and Saakashvili's continuous displays of authoritarianism, call into question just how significant the war was in his dramatic drop in standing. Public opinion polls from 2003 to 2008 show a dramatic drop in popular public support for Saakashvili among Georgians well before the actual war began.⁴³ People's trust in their government institutions decreased by an average of 20% over that time, and by 2008, 48% of Georgian's felt that the government did not listen to its civilians.⁴⁴ By 2008, people were fatigued from years of ineffective governance, and while Saakashvili did enjoy statistically higher support among older Georgians, younger generations were eager to find a new solution to Georgia's liberal crisis.⁴⁵

Two areas did display some growth during the period of 2003 to 2008, shedding greater light on just how influential the war was on the Georgian people's desire to democratize. The first is fear of corruption, which decreased from 72% when Saakashvili took power in 2004 to 39% in 2008.⁴⁶ While the statistics on economic welfare remained largely unchanged, this change showed that Saakashvili did take some meaningful steps towards liberalizing Georgian society, and the trade embargo instituted by Russia along with the

refugee crisis – which resulted from displaced people fleeing Abkhazia and Ossetia – made economic reform nearly impossible despite Saakashvili's best effort.⁴⁷ The number of Georgians in support of joining NATO and the EU was the other area which displayed growth, reaching 70% in 2008. This is the most significant statistic, as it indicates that it was not Saakashvili's policies that were so unpopular with Georgians, but rather the methodology that he deployed to accomplish his policy goals.

Had Georgians been upset by the nature of the war with Russia, such support would have decreased as it became clear that Western integration would come at the cost of conflict with Russia. Instead, it seems that Saakashvili's authoritarian trends – which led to the lack of pluralization parliament, the utilization of state resources to silence oppositional voices, and resulted in rash actions including mobilizing the military without proper preparation – led Georgians to elect Georgia Dream (GD) candidates Giorgi Margvelashvili to the presidency and Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's richest individual, to the post of Prime Minister in 2012. GD ran on very similar platforms to UNM, including a predominance of Western integration and territorial integrity; however, it was free of the influence of Saakashvili. In the West, many countries including the United States had grown tired of Saakashvili's subversion of democratic norms, and they endorsed GD in the elections.⁴⁸ Since Western integration was only possible with Western support, Saakashvili was destined for defeat before the voting even began.

CONCLUSION

Mikhail Saakashvili is a fascinating figure, and while he displays no lack of shortcomings, his battle to establish democracy in Georgia has at least some tragic elements. Upon being elected in 2004, the course of the conflict with Russia was already decided. Georgia had very little agency in how the conflict played out due to the determined disposition of Russia and the devastating disinterest of the West. Georgians themselves had little choice in the sequence of events resulting in war, but electing Saakashvili in 2004 was the logical attempt of a nation in desperate need of reform. Zviad Gamsakhurdia had tried to forge an independent path for Georgia free from both Russia and the West, but his policies of top-down unification only resulted in the bottom-up fragmentation of Georgian society. Eduard Shevardnadze represented the adoption of the past and the favoritism of historical ties to Russia, but his government was paralyzed by the corruption and clientelism that it fostered as a legacy of its Soviet structure. The only remaining option for Georgians seeking to make a better life for themselves was to break with the past and embrace integration into the West. In 2004, Saakashvili promised to liberalize a society which had never known true democracy, and although he enjoyed almost unanimous initial support, it was not enough to overcome the dilapidated state of Georgia's institutions necessary for the functioning of a fair and free democracy. Thus, while Saakashvili's authoritarian actions

Bohnenstiehl: Who Sent the Devil Down to Georgia?

worked to undermine his support and unravel his democratic dream, they were the only actions available to a man elected on the promise of liberalizing Georgia and integrating into the West.

Saakashvili foolishly overreached himself and walked into the trap that had been carefully set up by Russia. While he is certainly guilty of raising the expectations of Georgians desperate to see immediate meaningful change in their lives, the impossibility of his predicament must also be recognized. Saakashvili's actions were that of a panicked leader left out to hang by the West, blindsided by the lack of unequivocal support from Western allies in the face of any Russian opposition. This panic was leveraged by Russia, who had been quietly planning Georgia's fall long before Saakashvili was even elected.

END NOTES

- 1 Jonathan Wheatley, "Managing Ethnic Diversity in Georgia: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back," *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 2 (2009). 32.
- 2 Niklas Nilson, "Georgia's Conflicts: Abkhazia and South Ossetia," *Conflict, Crime, and the State in Postcommunist Eurasia*, 2014. 119.
- 3 Niklas Nilson and H Fredrich Starr, "Georgia's Rose Revolution: The Break with the Past," *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009). 89.
- 4 Paul A Goble and H Fredrich Starr, "Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russia and Georgia," *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009). 192.
- 5 Brian Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 34.
- 6 Andrei Illarionov and S. Fredrich Starr, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999–2008," *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 65.
- 7 David J Smith and H Fredrich Starr, "The Saakashvili Administration's Reaction to Russian Policies Before the 2008 War," *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 130.
- 8 Smith and Starr, "The Saakashvili Administration's Reaction," 125.
- 9 Lincoln A. Mitchell, "Compromising Democracy: State Building in Saakashvili's Georgia," *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 2 (2009), 86.
- 10 Goble and Starr, "Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russia and Georgia," 185.
- 11 Illarionov and Starr, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999–2008," 72.
- 12 Wheatley, "Managing Ethnic Diversity in Georgia: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back," 30.
- 13 Illarionov and Starr, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999–2008," 53.
- 14 Nilson and Starr, "Georgia's Rose Revolution: The Break with the Past," 117.
- 15 Illarionov and Starr, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999–2008," 53.
- 16 Illarionov and Starr, 65.
- 17 Michael Koffman, "The August War, Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War," August 17, 2018. 5.
- 18 Nilson and Starr, "Georgia's Rose Revolution: The Break with the Past," 90.
- 19 Nilson and Starr, 92.
- 20 Nana Sumbadze, "Saakashvili in the Public Eye: What Public Opinion Polls Tell Us," *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 2 (2009). 190.
- 21 Goble and Starr, "Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russia and Georgia," 187.
- 22 Stephen Blank and H Fredrich Starr, "From Neglect to Duress: The West and the Georgian Crisis Before the 2008 War," *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 109.
- 23 Koffman, "The August War, Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War", 92.
- 24 Goble and Starr, "Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russia and Georgia," 190.
- 25 Blank and Starr, "From Neglect to Duress: The West and the Georgian Crisis Before the 2008 War," 110.
- 26 Blank and Starr, 117.
- 27 Mark Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994–2009* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014). 70.
- 28 Smith and Starr, "The Saakashvili Administration's Reaction," 125.
- 29 Smith and Starr, 125.
- 30 Goble and Starr, "Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russia and Georgia," 181.
- 31 Blank and Starr, "From Neglect to Duress: The West and the Georgian Crisis Before the 2008 War," 119.
- 32 Goble and Starr, 183–184.
- 33 Goble and Starr, 187.
- 34 Goble and Starr, 183.
- 35 Goble and Starr, 180.
- 36 Illarionov and Starr, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999–2008," 72.
- 37 Nemanja Popovic, "The Energy Relationship between Russia and the European Union," *E-International Relations*, February 26, 2020.
- 38 Goble and Starr, "Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russia and Georgia," 185.
- 39 Goble and Starr, 185.

Bohnenstiehl: Who Sent the Devil Down to Georgia?

END NOTES (CONTINUED)

- 40 Goble and Starr, 185.
- 41 Illarionov and Starr, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999–2008," 64.
- 42 Goble and Starr, "Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russia and Georgia," 186.
- 43 Sumbadze, "Saakashvili in the Public Eye: What Public Opinion Polls Tell Us," 186.
- 44 Sumbadze, 188–192.
- 45 Sumbadze, 186.
- 46 Sumbadze, 188.
- 47 Davit Sukhiashvili, "A Comparative Analysis of Georgia's European Integration Policy During the Presidency of M. Saakashvili and After the Change of Power October 1 2012." *Всевітня Історія*, 2019. 84.
- 48 Sukhiashvili, 85.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blank, Stephen, and H Fredrich Starr. 2009. "From Neglect to Duress: The West and the Georgian Crisis Before the 2008 War Pp 104–121; 18 Pages." In *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, edited by Svante Cornell. *Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2009.
- Cornell, Svante E., and S. Frederick Starr. 2015. In *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Galeotti, Mark. 2014. *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994–2009*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing.
- Goble, Paul A, and H Fredrich Starr. 2009 "Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russia and Georgia." Essay, In *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, edited by Svante Cornell. *Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2009.
- Goltz, Thomas, and S. Fredrick Starr. 2009. "The Paradox of Living in Paradise: Georgia's Descent into Chaos." Essay. In *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, edited by Svante E. Cornell. *Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2009.
- Illarionov, Andrei, and S. Fredrich Starr. 2009. "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999–2008." Essay. In *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, edited by Svante Cornell. *Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2009.
- Koffman, Michael. 2018. "The August War, Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War."
- Mitchell, Lincoln A. 2009. "Compromising Democracy: State Building in Saakashvili's Georgia." *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 2.
- Nilson, Niklas, and H Fredrich Starr. 2009. "Georgia's Rose Revolution: The Break with the Past." In *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, edited by Svante Cornell. *Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2009.
- Nilson, Niklas. 2014. "Georgia's Conflicts: Abkhazia and South Ossetia." *Conflict, Crime, and the State in Postcommunist Eurasia*.
- Popovic, Nemanja. February 26, 2020. "The Energy Relationship between Russia and the European Union." *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/02/24/the-energy-relationship-between-russia-and-the-european-union/>.
- Smith, David J, and H Fredrich Starr. 2009. "The Saakashvili Administration's Reaction to Russian Policies Before the 2008 War." In *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, edited by Svante Cornell. *Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2009.
- Sukhiashvili, Davit. 2019. "A Comparative Analysis of Georgia's European Integration Policy During the Presidency of M. Saakashvili and After the Change of Power October 1 2012." *Всесвітня Історія*.
- Sumbadze, Nana. 2009. "Saakashvili in the Public Eye: What Public Opinion Polls Tell Us." *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 2. 185–97.
- Taylor, Brian. 2018. *The Code of Putinism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wheatley, Jonathan. 2009. "Managing Ethnic Diversity in Georgia: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back." *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 2.