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In Ukraine, Georgia Analogies Fall Short

There are many parallels between what is happening today in Ukraine and what happened in Georgia in 2008. But overstating them leads to misunderstanding both conflicts.

By Gerard Toal for Eurasianet

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As the crisis builds between Ukraine and Russia, the shadow of a previous regional conflict hangs heavily: the 2008 war between Georgia, Russia, and South Ossetia.

Many observers, with good reasons, are seeing ominous parallels with the events of 2008 and what is happening today. Is Russia once again about to invade a neighboring state that is unapologetically seeking membership in NATO?

Many Georgians will say they have seen this story before. A small former Soviet republic chooses to set itself on a path toward Euro-Atlantic institutions, only to be set upon by the neighborhood bear. Using deception and disguise, the bear baits the plucky state into a fight it

cannot win. In the end, the smaller state is battered and partially eaten.

The artillery fire now heard along the de facto boundary between the Russia-backed separatists in Donbas and the Ukrainian armed forces inevitably recalls exchanges of fire between the Russia-backed South Ossetian militia forces and the Georgian military in early August 2008.

So, too, does the recent lull and apparent withdrawal of Russian forces. Many experts have noted that Russia also announced that it was pulling back its forces following military exercises and railway construction work in Abkhazia just ahead of what was to become the August 2008 war.

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Matthew Bryza, who in 2008 was the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, wrote in a tweet: "Red Alert: #Russia used staged artillery strikes by #SouthOssetian separatists, and Georgian troops' reply, to justify its invasion of Georgia in 2008."

Drawing parallels to earlier conflicts, and citing similar modalities at work, are important in understanding the current crisis in Ukraine. But this analysis is compromised when partisans with strong geopolitical views and one-sided perceptions of history use these precedents merely to affirm their prior convictions.

The comparison with the August 2008 war and today's crisis in Ukraine fails in two major ways.

The first is that the August 2008 war, as a large inter-state war, was precipitated by the decision of the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to launch a planned military assault Tskhinvali, the de facto capital of South Ossetia. Bryza was in close communication with the Georgian government at this time, so his viewpoint is important. But it is that of a participant and not of a detached observer; a player, not a referee.

There is still a great deal that we do not know about the August 2008 war. The nearest we have to a comprehensive account is the European Union-commissioned "Tagliavini Report," which concluded that "the shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict in Georgia." The prior village artillery exchanges are important, though, as the context in which fear grew and these decisions were made. There is a clear lesson for Ukrainian President Volodomyr Zelinskiy here: do not escalate in the face of violent provocations.

This brings us to the second way in which the comparison to August 2008 fails. For many, the August 2008 War was not a contingent event but the unfolding of a previously drawn up Russian plan. Using tactics and strategies from the "Kremlin playbook," like "maximum pressure" and "reflexive control," Russia's leadership baited Georgia into a war that Russia wanted; everything pretty much worked out the way the Kremlin had planned. This perspective is that of history as the unfolding of conspiratorial plots and designs by one's enemies. Russia had war contingency plans and pre-positioned equipment in South Ossetia:

therefore, it wanted war. Russia certainly was ready for war: It saw Saakashvili's military buildup and took his territorial revanchism seriously.

The August War analogy is an important issue to analyze. First, it informs the current crisis in that the thinking of all the players today – the Russian leadership, the Ukrainian leadership, the local separatist forces, NATO, the U.S. and European decision-makers – has been shaped by August 2008 as a signal event in Georgian, post-Soviet and European affairs.

Some of the players, like Russian President Vladimir Putin and, to a lesser extent, U.S. President Joe Biden, have strong personal memories of the war. Biden, a senator in 2008, travelled to Georgia immediately after the war ended. Georgia's experience in August 2008 informed Ukraine's decision not to respond violently to Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, a decision that undoubtedly saved many lives. Putin, professionally inclined to conspiracy theories, sees Washington's hand in events. Learning the wrong lessons from history influences the present.

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In addition, it is important to analyze the habits and practices of states, and how they go about pursuing policies to achieve their interests. The "Kremlin playbook" metaphor is hyperbolic but there are observable repertoires of statecraft that all states use, and that particular states use frequently. Russia is an imperial state with well-developed tactics of influence, control and domination in its own neighborhood.

While it did not set out to create the de facto states that currently exist in Georgia or Moldova, it has certainly supported them under Putin and used them as territorial levers of influence over their parent states. Russia's military actions were decisive in standing up the two separatist republics in the Donbas and it is currently using these entities to advance its goal of stopping NATO expansion to Ukraine.

It may be ugly geopolitics, but Russia's leadership is responding with determination to what it perceives as unacceptable encroachment by a hostile alliance to its borders. It has preponderant military power and it is using it. Its neighbors, however, have choices in how to respond to that reality. They just may not like them.

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