

THE 2008 RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR: GLOBAL REACTIONS AND LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

While discussing the August 2008 war in Georgia, also known as the Russo-Georgian War, its diplomatic journey marks a significant turning point in the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus and has far-reaching implications for international relations. The war's aftermath reshaped Russia-Georgia relations and highlighted the limitations of Western influence in post-Soviet spaces. The war also revealed broader implications for global security, NATO expansion, and EU-Russia relations, serving as a precursor to future tensions in Eastern Europe. This paper examines global reactions - the diverse attitudes of key stakeholders towards the conflict and analyzes the ensuing consequences from 2008 to 2024. By exploring the perspectives and policy responses of these actors, this paper aims to elucidate the broader geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian impacts of the war. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the current state of regional security, and the ongoing challenges in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

KEYWORDS

Russo-Georgian War, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Security, NATO, EU, USA

1. INTRODUCTION

The Russo-Georgian War, which broke out in August 2008 in Georgia, was the result of decades-long tensions and unresolved territorial issues between Georgia and Russia, rather than an abrupt outbreak of hostilities. Georgia is a small transcontinental country in Eastern Europe and West Asia, which is bounded by the Black Sea, Russia, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan to the southeast. Due to its favorable location, it has been subject to wars and occupations since ancient times. During the Soviet era, the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic included South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, both regions declared independence from Georgia. Before they were recognised as autonomous inside Georgia.

The following decade was marked by economic difficulties and political unrest. After the peaceful Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia shifted toward a pro-Western foreign policy, implementing reforms aimed at joining the EU and NATO, which strained relations with Russia and ultimately led to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and ongoing Russian occupation of parts of Georgia. After the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, Russia formally recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent, despite the international community's belief that they were part of Georgia. It is crucial to examine the pre-war relationships and catalysts that built the geopolitical environment of the South Caucasus in order to comprehend the complicated nature of this war.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, Georgia briefly gained independence on May 26, 1918. As a result, the Democratic Republic of Georgia was established. However, in 1922, the Soviet Union invaded and annexed Georgia, making it one of its republics. In the 1980s, a strong independence movement emerged, leading to Georgia's secession from the Soviet Union in April 1991. Tensions between Georgia and the separatist regions started to rise in the early 1990s, that is when the conflict first started. The situation was further worsened by Russia's diplomatic and military assistance for these separatist movements, which resulted in intermittent violence and diplomatic deadlocks. Geopolitical factors also play a crucial role in South Ossetia's resistance to integration with Georgia. Russia, seeking to exert influence in the region and counter Georgia's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration, has historically supported separatist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The presence of Russian peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia has further entrenched the region's de facto independence from Georgia. Politically, many Ossetians in South Ossetia have expressed a desire for independence or closer ties with Russia rather than being a part of Georgia. The political leadership in South Ossetia has actively pursued separatist goals, seeking recognition as an independent state or integration with Russia [3], [9].

The situation remained tense with occasional outbreaks of violence and unsuccessful attempts at dispute resolution throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. Georgia's goals to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic, particularly its wish to join the EU and NATO, further strained ties with Russia, which saw these actions as a direct threat to its regional interests. There were several provocations and occurrences in the pre-war era that increased tensions between Georgia and Russia. A burning atmosphere that was ready for confrontation was created by military build-ups along the administrative boundary lines, conflicts between Georgian and separatist forces, and diplomatic standoffs. An unstable environment prone to war was created by Georgia's dissatisfaction with the unresolved status of South Ossetia and the escalating tensions between Georgia and Russia [14]. A war began with the shooting down of an unmanned Georgian drone in April of 2008, this act was called a "low-intensity warfare", followed by the deployment of more Russian and Ossetian troops to the conflict zones in July, again in breach of existing accords, and by the holding of military drills in Abkhazia with heavy weaponry, which is forbidden in the region by current cease-fire agreements. And finally, Georgian forces began a military operation to regain control over South Ossetia on the evening of August 7, 2008; The Georgian government said that its operations were intended to restore peace and order in the region and were a reaction to provocations made by South Ossetian separatists. However, Russia moved quickly to defend South Ossetia, sending troops into the area and beginning a massive military campaign of its own. Georgian defences were rapidly overrun by Russian soldiers, who subsequently moved far into Georgian territory, including regions outside of South Ossetia [1], [7], [11].

The war lasted for several days, with numerous losses and extensive destruction as the conflict quickly grew more intense. Despite efforts by the international community to mediate a ceasefire and terminate hostilities, the war did not officially end until August 12, 2008, when a ceasefire agreement was ultimately reached- French President Nicolas Sarkozy flew to Georgia. Sarkozy brought a 6-point plan to end the war, where the 6th point was added at the request of Russia and had the following content: "The status of the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be clarified in the future international negotiations". The answer from the Georgian side was that - the territories are not disputed and their status is decided by Georgia. In the end, Medvedev agreed to remove the 6th point [17].

Figure 1. Map of Georgia



Source: <https://usrussiarelations.org/2/timeline/after-the-fall/106>

The nation was presented with an extremely difficult task: reacting to Russia's fatal military invasion while negotiating the complicated dynamics of a geopolitical environment that was changing quickly. Resilience, determination, and strategic realignment defined Georgia's response to the war as it attempted to reconstruct, reaffirm its sovereignty, and negotiate the post-conflict environment.

Georgia was thrown into a dilemma as soon as hostilities broke out, its people having to deal with the brutality of war and its territory being attacked. Even though Russian forces were militarily superior to Georgia, the country's response was distinguished by a resolute dedication to upholding its sovereignty and safeguarding its people. In response to Russian assault, President Mikheil Saakashvili's administration sought for international support and mobilised the nation's armed forces. The original goal of the Georgian military's involvement in South Ossetia was to bring peace back to the area, but as Russian forces intervened into Georgian territory, the situation swiftly spiralled out of control. As Georgia attempted to restore and reaffirm its sovereignty internationally, its post-war response changed from military confrontation to diplomatic manoeuvring. The administration of President Saakashvili adopted a multipronged approach to win over the international community and restore infrastructure [13].

In addition to South Ossetia, attacks also began in the Kodori region-Abkhazia, the Georgian government was faced with a choice - either they had to resist, or they had to withdraw their units from the Kodori valley, that's what they did, they withdrew the army. Accordingly, the Russians invaded and captured the strategically important Kodori valley for Georgians [6].

Figure 2. Map of Abkhazia (Georgia), Kodori Valley



Source: <https://picryl.com/media/abkhazia-kodori-valley-99dcb6>

3. INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS AND DIPLOMATIC INTERVENTIONS: THE GLOBAL RESPONSE

Following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, numerous countries and international organizations swiftly denounced Russia's actions and demanded a ceasefire. The European Union, NATO, the United Nations and the United States spearheaded diplomatic efforts, advocating for peace negotiations and putting up ideas for resolving conflicts. But even with broad participation and a plethora of diplomatic interventions, these attempts failed to prevent protracted unrest.

For instance, the European Union took an active role in peace initiatives and diplomatic efforts aimed at reducing tensions and fostering reconciliation. After understanding the seriousness of the situation, the EU promptly gathered diplomatic resources and began efforts to mediate the crisis and encourage a peaceful resolution. [10]. The EU's October 2008 deployment of the European Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to Georgia was one of its main diplomatic measures. The mission involved monitoring the implementation of the ceasefire agreement and encouraging confidence-building measures between the parties involved. The observers included civilian and military representatives from EU member states. The EUMM's presence contributed to the reduction of hostilities and the development of a favourable atmosphere for communication and peacemaking. The EU actively engaged in diplomatic talks with all parties involved in the war, including Georgia, Russia, and the separatist republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in addition to deploying the EUMM [2], [4].

Through high-level diplomatic meetings, shuttle diplomacy, and multilateral forums, the European Union endeavoured to reconcile differences, promote communication, and motivate the involved parties to strive for a ceasefire. Additionally, the EU was crucial in setting up diplomatic summits and international peace conferences that addressed the underlying issues that led to the conflict and encouraged peace. One such endeavour was the October 2008 start of the Geneva International Discussions, which convened officials from Georgia, Russia, the US, and the separatist areas to talk about security and stability in the South Caucasus. In these talks, the EU acted as a mediator and facilitator, offering a forum for communication and bargaining.

Through humanitarian aid, development assistance, and infrastructure projects, the EU was instrumental in Georgia's reconstruction and recovery from the destruction caused by the war [18]. While the EU remained a major trading partner for Georgia, accounting for a significant portion of its exports and imports, the conflict disrupted trade flows and raised concerns about the stability of economic relations between the two parties. Efforts were made to mitigate these disruptions and promote trade normalization through trade facilitation measures and assistance programs [19], [20].

The conflict also affected the investment climate in Georgia, with uncertainty and security concerns deterring foreign investors, including those from EU member states. The EU sought to address these challenges by promoting investment initiatives and providing technical assistance to improve the business environment in Georgia. However, lingering security concerns continued to pose obstacles to foreign investment in the country. During the war, the European Union pledged about €863 million through the European Commission, the European Parliament, its 27 member states, and the European Investment Bank. [15].

The signing of the Association Agreement in 2014, which includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), was a major milestone, fostering closer economic ties and political cooperation between Georgia and the EU after the war. By allowing for the progressive reduction of tariffs and the conformity of Georgian

laws and regulations with EU norms, the DCFTA seeks to further integrate Georgia's economy with the EU [22]. Following the DCFTA's implementation, Georgia has had a number of favourable economic effects: The lowering of tariffs and standardisation have resulted in a rise in Georgian exports to the EU. Wine, mineral water, and agricultural items have been an important exports. Georgia has become more alluring to foreign investors due to its enhanced regulatory framework and easier access to the EU market. There has been an increase in investment in industries like manufacturing, agriculture, and services. As for The US and NATO in total, they have immediately denounced Russia's military invasion into Georgia and affirmed its support for Georgia's independence and territorial wholeness.

The US chose to concentrate primarily on providing humanitarian supplies to Georgia and denouncing Russia's conduct during the Russian-Georgian conflict, allowing the European Union unrestricted authority to mediate a ceasefire agreement between Georgia and Russia. Washington made this decision in large part because of Moscow's stance- Russia publicly charged that the United States was helping Georgia and inciting the conflict in South Ossetia. Which meant that Russia would have hardly agreed to American mediation and there would have been less chances of the war ending [5]. A number of issues influenced Washington's foreign policy decisions:

Firstly, Moscow sees American efforts to advance democracy and a free market economy in the former Soviet republics as an attempt to lessen Moscow's power within its own borders. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, such efforts have continued. Secondly, Georgia has a significant influence on the energy policy of the US administration. The Baku-Tbilisi-Erzrum and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipelines were built in the 1990s with Washington's assistance in order to supply gas and oil to European markets without going through Russia or Iran. Moscow thought that these initiatives were intended to lessen Russian influence over the area and lessen the reliance of the West on Russian energy supply. The West's strategy of diversifying its energy sources will be greatly aided if it can hold onto its positions in Georgia and stop additional Russian military aggression against the nation. Lastly, Georgia was viewed as America's dependable ally and even before to the war, it had the third- largest military presence in Iraq, behind the United States and Great Britain. In the years preceding the war, the United States had developed close ties with Georgia, offering military support, training, and aid to enhance Georgia's defence capabilities and fortify its alliance with NATO. In the end, America could have done more, but Russia would not have given up its influence on Georgia so easily and would not have given America more freedom at that time [8].

The war prompted neighbouring nations to take differing positions on policy, according on their geopolitical calculations and strategic objectives [12]. Citing worries about the defence of minority rights and self-determination, Armenia, a close ally of Russia and the spot of a large Russian military base, declared support for Russia. Azerbaijan took a careful approach, attempting to balance its relations with Georgia and Russia while defending its own interests in the context of the Nagorno- Karabakh conflict, because it was concerned about Russian dominance and eager to keep peace in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan's position to the war has been further affected by its strategic cooperation with Turkey, which has been a vociferous opponent of Russia's activities in Georgia [16]. Turkey, a significant regional actor with historical ties to Georgia, expressed support for Georgia and denounced Russia's invasion to Georgia, raising concerns about the potential security consequences of Russian expansionism. Turkey wanted to keep peace along its southern flank and balance off Russian dominance in the area, which is why it supported Georgia. In conclusion, this war demonstrated strong diplomatic involvement but was ultimately insufficient to prevent long-term instability.

4. POST-WAR RELATIONS BETWEEN GEORGIA AND RUSSIA

In the years of 2008-2012 diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia were practically non-existent. Georgia cut off diplomatic ties with Russia, and the two countries remained in a state of hostility. Russia accused Georgia of inciting the conflict and attempting to destabilise the area, while Georgia accused Russia of aggression and territorial expansionism. Dialogue and reconciliation efforts were impeded by deep grievances and divergent views of the origins and effects of the war [21].

During the post-war era, Georgia faced a number of economic sanctions from Russia, such as import prohibitions and trade restrictions. These actions were perceived as a form of reprisal against Georgia for its efforts to forge stronger connections with the West and to become a member of NATO and the EU. These actions had a huge negative economic impact, making Georgia's already fragile economy worse and increasing its reliance on funding and assistance from the West.

In 2012, Georgia saw a significant political shift with the election of Bidzina Ivanishvili as Prime Minister, ending President Saakashvili's nine-year rule. Ivanishvili expressed a desire to improve relations with Russia and initiated diplomatic efforts to ease tensions. However, progress was limited, and mistrust persisted on both sides.

In 2014 relations between Russia and Georgia faced renewed tensions following Russia's annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Georgia condemned Russia's actions and reiterated its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, leading to a further deterioration in bilateral relations. From the period of 2015 till 2018 the diplomatic relations were balanced, but the population always had the negative feeling for the restoration of their relations. A Russian lawmaker's visit to the Georgian Parliament in June 2019 set off widespread protests in Tbilisi, Georgia. The demonstrations brought to light persistent anti-Russian sentiments within the Georgian populace and emphasised the difficulties in restoring diplomatic ties between the two nations.

In 2020–2024, relations between Russia and Georgia remained strained and characterised by irregular events, despite sporadic diplomatic endeavours and attempts to engage in discussion. Russia is keeping up its military presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Back in 2008 Georgia filed a case against Russia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). According to the case, Russia violated the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) during the conflict. Georgia claimed that in the breakaway areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia had engaged in ethnic cleansing and discrimination against ethnic Georgians.

Georgia asked for temporary measures to stop what it described as ongoing ethnic cleansing and other grave human rights abuses carried out by Russian armed troops and separatist militias operating under their command in its appeal to the International Court of Justice. In addition, Georgia asked the Court to compel Russia to stop taking any measures that may intensify or prolong the conflict, to permit humanitarian aid, and to guarantee the safe repatriation of displaced people to their homes.

In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) declared that Russia was accountable for violating six articles of the European Convention on Human Rights and for failing to carry out a thorough investigation into the alleged violation of the right to life following the August 2008 Russo-Georgian War. This decision was a significant victory for Georgia and its citizens.

Although Georgian citizens are mainly opposed to the Russian politics, as of 2024, the Georgian government continues to maintain a 'neutral position.' Georgia faces significant challenges in advancing its bid for EU membership, a candidate status was given to Georgia in 2023, but now the integration process is stalled. The future of Georgia's relationship with both Russia and the West will depend heavily on the outcome of these elections.

5. REGIONAL SECURITY AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

Looking ahead, the implications of the Russo-Georgian War for regional security remain profound. The continued presence of Russian military forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia has resulted the likelihood of further conflict, especially given the unresolved status of these territories and ongoing ethnic tensions.

Moreover, the war has led to an increased militarization of the region. Georgia has invested heavily in its military capabilities and sought closer ties with NATO, while Russia has expanded its military presence and capabilities in the South Caucasus. Additionally, the geopolitical landscape is continually evolving, with emerging global powers asserting their influence. The increasing involvement of China and Turkey in the South Caucasus could introduce new dynamics into the security equation, providing both opportunities for economic cooperation and challenges in terms of competing interests.

Sooner or later, Russia will have to leave both occupied territories: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgians will need to engage in dialogue with the Abkhazians, as they represent the primary population in these regions, and finding common ground is essential for coexistence. Currently, the focus is on the war between Russia and Ukraine, but it remains to be seen what the future holds for Georgia and its occupied territories.

6. CONCLUSION

The Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 significantly reshaped the geopolitical landscape, highlighting the fragility of national borders and the complexities of post-Soviet politics. The conflict resulted in Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, escalating tensions between Georgia and Russia and challenging international norms of territorial integrity.

Ultimately, the future of this region hinges on the ability of its states to navigate these challenges collaboratively, which means that occupied territories should go back to where they belong. International actors, including the European Union and the United States, must reaffirm their commitment to supporting stability in the region. In doing so, they can help create an environment conducive to lasting peace and security.

In summary, the Russo-Georgian War serves as a reminder of the volatility of regional security and the importance of addressing historical grievances. The lessons learned from this war are crucial for fostering cooperation and understanding as the region navigates its complex future.

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