

## An August War in the Caucasus

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### Q1: The war between Russia and Georgia seems to have caught the United States by surprise. Why?

**A1:** Numerous experts on the region have worried and warned about the potential for explosive conflict, but policymakers, especially in the United States, have been focused on other issues—namely Iraq. Experts have also disagreed about the political trajectory of Russia, with many downplaying the importance of the authoritarian drift. The events over the last several days are a reminder for those who had forgotten or were skeptical: Russia's internal political dynamics have international security ramifications. Georgia may well have overplayed its hand too. Still, even those who have followed the region closely were shocked by the speed with which this has become war and, particularly, by Russian air strikes on Georgian civilian targets.

The Russian authorities have run an anti-Georgian campaign inside Russia for several years. Boycotts of products followed periodic expulsions of diplomats. The threat factor seemed to be seeping into the public consciousness: in a CSIS survey in May 2007, we found that fully one-third of a nationally representative sample of 1,800 Russians aged 16 to 29 believed Georgia was Russia's enemy. At the time, we focused on the fact that 22 percent regarded the United States that way. We should have zeroed in on the finding that over twice as many young Russians viewed Georgia as an enemy as viewed Iran that way—31 percent versus 14 percent. (We also found that only 6 percent viewed China as an enemy, and a tiny 3 percent and 2 percent respectively thought that about Belarus and Germany.) In other words, of all these countries, Russian respondents viewed Georgia, a NATO and EU aspirant, as enemy number one. If these findings are representative of how the population as a whole feels, Russians will believe that Vladimir Putin's war in Georgia is justified.

### Q2: The Russian government is calling what has happened in South Ossetia “genocide.” Is it?

**A2:** A word that most Western policymakers will barely whisper, let alone speak publicly because of its international legal implications, the term genocide is now nearly ubiquitous in Russian accounts of events in Georgia. *Russia Today*, the Kremlin-friendly, English-language, 24-hour cable television station, ran throughout Sunday the headline, “Ossetia Genocide.” Vitaly Churkin, the Russian ambassador to the United Nations, speaking to the Security Council on Sunday afternoon compared the situation today in South Ossetia to Srebrenica. Russian television and government authorities claim that there has been “ethnic cleansing” of Ossetians by Georgians. While this use of the term genocide will come as another surprise to the United States, Russians have claimed that genocide has been going on in South Ossetia for several years. In October 2006, weeks after the expulsion of Russian diplomats from Georgia on grounds that they were spies, the local Parliament in Russia's North Ossetia urged the State Duma, according to Itar-Tass, “to take all legitimate measures to inform the international community about facts of genocide of Ossetian people by nationalistic and extremist forces of Georgia over decades.”

Clearly, if either side has committed genocide or mass atrocities, they must be independently investigated and justice sought. We don't know the answer to Russia's claims, but given the conduct of Russian forces in Chechnya in recent years, including the targeting of International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) vehicles, bombing of civilians, disappearances, and the installation of a brutal dictator, Ramzan Kadyrov, the West is likely to be skeptical. What is clear is that at the moment, Americans, Europeans, and Russians are watching entirely different wars on television and reading dramatically different accounts on the Internet. For the United States and Europe, Russia is striking deep into Georgia. Concerns that Russia may threaten Georgia's very sovereignty as an independent entity appear in no way exaggerated and must lie behind the appeal over the weekend by the presidents of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland for the European Union and NATO to “take the initiative and stand up against the spread of imperialist and revisionist policy in the east of Europe.”

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

**Q3: What are the consequences of this conflict for the region?**

**A3:** This conflict is a tragedy for the people of this region. Instead of negotiating over the hotels, golf courses, and resorts that ought to be built along Georgia's Black Sea coast, bringing tourists and needed revenue to the citizens of the region, Russia and Georgia have gone to war. At this moment, it is hard to see where or how the conflict will end. The Georgian government has called for a ceasefire. There are also fears that Russia might overrun Georgia, bringing down the government of Mikhail Sakashvili through the use of force. Whatever the outcome, Russia has all but obliterated Georgia's possibility of joining NATO as it cannot belong to this alliance if it has unresolved border disputes. Russia has successfully burned Georgia's NATO card.

This war could also turn out badly for Russia; the neighborhood is awash in arms from wars in Chechnya and ongoing conflicts in Dagestan and Ingushetia. Next month is the fourth anniversary of the tragic Beslan siege in North Ossetia. Exploding bombs are still nearly daily events in this region. Yet Vitaly Churkin used the following astounding phrase in the Security Council in reference to Chechnya on Sunday afternoon: "everything is in its place now"—a phrase that smoothed over the deaths of thousands of Russian citizens there as well as the tenuous control that Russia has over the authoritarian Ramzan Kadyrov. Are Russian authorities looking to put everything "in its place" in Georgia?

**Q4: What are the international consequences?**

**A4:** For all the violence in the North Caucasus in recent years, there has been little international focus and even less appetite for engaging the Russian authorities on abuses there. I have seen this first hand; in 2005 and 2006, CSIS hosted several meetings with European and U.S. government officials on how to improve human rights and security in the region. Today, one wonders if the prior lack of international action emboldened, perhaps enabled, the Russian authorities to think they can do what they like in Georgia with impunity.

Can they? By using the term genocide to describe what is going on in South Ossetia, is Russia calling the West's bluff? The very same Russian ambassador who cynically used the term genocide and ethnic cleansing yesterday vetoed not long ago sanctions against Zimbabwe and, together with the Chinese delegation, has slowed the international response to Darfur and Burma. Ample evidence has suggested for some time that the Russian authorities are attempting to advance a hyper-sovereign, nineteenth-century conception of the state. They are attempting to reset the table on human rights. The key question remains: will they be successful? With little Western leverage to roll Russia back, and little appetite to stand together with the Georgians, the answer is very likely yes.

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