

Is Nationalism Rising in Russian Foreign Policy? The Case of Georgia

LUKE MARCH

Abstract: In this article, the foreign policy influence of Russian nationalism, from the Putin to the Medvedev eras, is traced, with a focus specifically on Russian nationalist arguments for and reactions to the August 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia. The typical relationship between Russian nationalism and foreign policy is one in which the authorities have generally promoted a pragmatic, conservative “statist nationalism.” Nevertheless, they have simultaneously stoked more aggressive ethno-nationalist “civilizational nationalism” in the domestic sphere. The Russia–Georgia War was a marked deviation from this pattern, showing an unprecedented spill-over from the domestic to the foreign policy realms. Since 2009, there has been a partial return to the norm. However, without more fundamental domestic change, the likelihood of nationalism increasingly affecting Russian foreign policy remains.

Keywords: foreign policy, Georgia, nationalism, Russia

Western discussion during the last half-decade has increasingly focussed on an “assertive” and even “aggressive” Russian foreign policy that underpins an ever more confident global position. From a Russia that could only say “yes” in the 1990s, the West is apparently now confronting a Russia that can, and will, say “no.”¹

For many analysts, this assertive stance has been associated with distinct ideational underpinnings that have sought to challenge Western liberalism. Although “sovereign

Luke March is Senior Lecturer in Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Deputy Director of the Princess Dashkova Russia Centre at the University of Edinburgh, UK. His main research interests are contemporary Russian and Moldovan politics, the radical left in Europe, Communism and Russian nationalism. His recent articles include “Managing opposition in a hybrid regime: Just Russia and parastatal opposition” (*Slavic Review*, Fall 2009), and his books include *Russia and Islam: State, Society and Radicalism* (edited, with Roland Dannreuther, Routledge, 2010) and *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia* (Manchester University Press, 2002). His next book, *Radical Left Parties in Europe*, will be published by Routledge in 2011. Copyright © 2011 World Affairs Institute

democracy” has been the most obvious example, many have also argued that anti-Western nationalism has moved from the margins to the mainstream of Russian discourse during the Putin era.² Moreover, this nationalism had, apparently, begun ineluctably to influence Russian foreign policy and to deepen the rhetorical and cognitive dissonance between Russia and the West. Indeed, as Edward Lucas argued, “the ideological conflict of the New Cold War is between lawless Russian nationalism and law-governed Western multilateralism.”³

However, the role nationalism might have played in the Russia–Georgia War of August 2008 has been largely ignored. One of the most influential authors on the conflict, Ronald Asmus, did argue that “by the summer of 2008 ... an increasingly nationalistic and revisionist Russia was ... rebelling against a system that it felt no longer met its interests and had been imposed on it during a moment of temporary weakness.”⁴ Neither he nor other authors examined this in depth. Yet his contention can support a narrative of “lawless Russian nationalism.” Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in defiance of Euro-Atlantic positions can be seen as the tipping-point when Russia began to substantiate its rhetoric and to export highly nationalistic internal values in an attempt to revise the post-Cold War order.

Nevertheless, hindsight perhaps confounds this view. Although the Western consensus is that Russia wanted and planned the war, Western and Georgian mistakes mean that a narrative of “good” West versus “evil” Russia (implicit in Lucas’s account) cannot be convincingly maintained.⁵ More widely, the US–Russia “reset” has involved a marked change of climate and de-escalation of rhetoric. Russia itself has focused increasingly on internal modernization, and the immediate fear that it was to pursue overt annexation of other contested regions like Crimea and Transnistria has receded. Finally, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev’s modernization rhetoric is associated with increased efforts to control domestic nationalist excesses via greater law enforcement.⁶

In this article, I will trace the foreign policy influence of Russian nationalism from the Putin to the Medvedev eras, focussing specifically on Russian nationalist arguments for and reactions to the August 2008 conflict. The main questions in focus are: (1) What are the basic dynamics of the relationship between nationalism and foreign policy under Putin and Medvedev?; (2) What role did Russian nationalism play in the Russia–Georgia War? Was it a significant motivating factor in Russian conduct for the conflict as Asmus indicated?; and, (3) Overall, was the role of Russian nationalism in the war a corroboration of or a deviation from this general relationship? I will end with some observations about whether the influence of nationalism on Russian foreign policy has indeed decreased since 2008 and whether Russian nationalism presents a significant obstacle to the “modernization” and “resetting” of Russian policy.

I will argue that the typical relationship between Russian nationalism and foreign policy is a complex one—it is simply not the case that Russian nationalism is inherently expansionist and militarist, as some classic accounts argue.⁷ Even under Putin and Medvedev, the authorities have generally promoted a foreign policy based on “statist nationalism” that is conservative as opposed to reactionary, and that is orientated toward pragmatism, not ideology. In the foreign policy realm, the authorities traditionally attempt to insulate themselves from constrictive ideational factors in general, including more aggressive forms of nationalism. Nevertheless, they have simultaneously stoked more aggressive ethno-nationalist sentiment (“civilizational nationalism”) in the domestic sphere for

legitimacy and mobilization purposes—sometimes inadvertently, but often quite deliberately, in ways that conflict with their declared foreign policy goals. The typical relationship is, then, not of nationalism motivating or “driving” foreign policy, but of the elites exploiting nationalism for domestic purposes.

However, the Russia–Georgia War was a marked deviation from this pattern. Civilizational nationalism did directly matter in foreign policy, because foreign policy and domestic discourse became blended to an unprecedented degree, and the terms of debate were largely those set by the civilizationists. This was not a sudden phenomenon; in the Putin era, the domestic mobilization of civilizational nationalism increased so that it became the “politically correct” domestic discourse. Yet the Georgian case is one which shows an unprecedented spill-over from the domestic to the foreign policy realms—the long build-up to the 2008 war showed a gradual comingling of Russian official and civilizationist attitudes that created a self-fulfilling prophecy—from the Russian perspective, Georgia was the hostile, nationalist “aggressor” against whom measures had to be taken. Moreover, the conflict also showed that for the first time, civilizational nationalism was directly influencing Russian foreign policy, even at the level of doctrine. Since 2009, there has been a partial return to the norm; the Russian elite seems aware of the dangers of aggressive nationalism escaping its control and has sought to return to non-ideational, non-nationalist rhetoric. However, without more fundamental domestic change, this is likely to remain a superficial “reset” that does not circumvent the likelihood of nationalism increasingly affecting Russian foreign policy.

Nationalism and Foreign Policy: From “Managed” to Unmanageable?

Observers fundamentally disagree about the role of nationalism in Russian foreign policy. This is unsurprising. As John Breuilly argues, there is a significant conceptual problem with identifying state nationalism: “nationalist” governments whose policies defend “national interests” and which other states might regard as “assertive” or “aggressive” are so universal that “governmental nationalism” can become a meaningless category unless there is an obvious, direct link between government and a nationalist movement.⁸ In Russia, no such link exists.

Nevertheless, three broad approaches to Russian state nationalism can be identified. Liberal views tend to assume that domestic ideas and constituencies are determining in general and nationalism has become more relevant (and dangerous) in particular. For example, analysts have traced the influence of anti-Western neo-Eurasianists like Aleksandr Dugin and Mikhail Leont’ev over the political establishment—in particular the number of leading Russian executive and legislative figures in Dugin’s International Eurasian Movement (including Presidential aide Aslanbek Aslakhanov and South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity).⁹ For some, indeed, Putin has himself been heavily influenced by neo-Eurasianist ideas.¹⁰ For many, increasing domestic authoritarianism promotes anti-Western nationalism in foreign policy.¹¹ For them, Russian foreign policy has become increasingly driven by its domestic imperatives. Most notably, the Kremlin doctrine of “sovereign democracy” was motivated primarily by the need to defend against regional “colored revolutions” and allegedly marked a fundamental existential challenge to the West.¹²

In contrast, many (primarily, but not exclusively, realists) argue that even under Putin, Russia remains a predominantly pragmatic, non-ideological state motivated

largely by traditional high-level security concerns, material interests, and economic opportunism—this is the Russia, Inc. outlined by Dmitri Trenin.¹³ The highly consolidated elite can conduct foreign policy independently of domestic interest when necessary, as in Putin’s notorious pro-Western shift after September 11, 2001. Of course, the Russian foreign policy elite themselves largely share this realist view, seeing their policy as one of pragmatic and rational national interests based around *raison d’état*.

Arguably more persuasive are broadly constructivist accounts that do not assume *a priori* that external or internal factors are dominant, but argue that they are dialectical and mediated subjectively via the policy process.¹⁴ For instance, externally-projected “national interests” are themselves always subjectively defined through the prism of domestic nationalism—a state can only agree on such interests if national identity itself is defined.

Focusing on the domestic-foreign policy nexus reveals certain longterm trends. For example, Astrid Tuminez argues that the Russian Imperial and Soviet foreign policy traditions shared a desire to prioritize interests of state over nation and to insulate foreign policymaking from aggressive nationalism.¹⁵ Such nationalism was regarded as useful for domestic consolidation, but was seen as constricting and even dangerous when exported into the foreign policy realm. When nationalism did affect foreign policy more directly, this was usually in conditions of international and national crisis and profound elite divisions; it was more generally used simply to reinforce traditional views of Russia as a “great power.”¹⁶ Such a tradition continued into the post-Soviet era. For instance, it is generally understood that the 1990s ushered in unprecedented competition between three broad schools of foreign policy (usually known as Westernizers, Statists/Pragmatic nationalists and Hard-Line Nationalists/Civilizationists), as outlined in Table 1. In the 1990s, the civilizationists were the most publicly vocal. However, the elite gave them only rhetorical concessions (e.g. forming the Russian-Belarusian Union) and generally regarded their policies as geopolitically confrontational and economically counterproductive, at least when relations with the West were good.¹⁷

TABLE 1. Russian nationalist views of foreign policy

Variable	Westernizers	Statists	Civilizationists
Concept of “nation”	Civic: Russia as liberal democratic, constitutional, multi-ethnic (Rossiyskoe) state	Statist/civic; Russia as illiberal, constitutional, multiethnic (Rossiyskoe) state	Ethnic: Russia as unique civilization based on culture and values of ethnic Russians (Russkie)
Foreign policy objectives	Integration with West	Sovereignty; Great power status	Empire; cultural independence
Foreign policy methods	Alliances with West	Flexible alliances	Alliances against West (Clash of civilizations)
Relative strength in 2000s	Weak	Strong	Weak but increasing

Since Putin came to power, the statisticians have been dominant in domestic and foreign policy-making. However, their precise relationship to other nationalist views is ambiguous. This is barely surprising, since, as Oxana Shevel notes, every distinct discourse of nationhood in post-Soviet Russia has conceptual and practical ambiguities and contradictions that both reflect and reinforce Russia's unfinished nation-building.¹⁸ On one hand, at an ideological level, the statisticians are barely "nationalists" at all—they rarely talk about "nation," and their central concepts are statehood (*gosudarstvennost'*) and great power status (*derzhavnost'*). The statisticians appear to be archetypal conservatives, for whom stability, pragmatism and national tradition are more important than "nation" as an independent ideological construct.¹⁹ When they do talk about the Russian nation, this is generally defined in civic, multiethnic terms—Putin has talked about *Rossiyskaya natsiya*, not *Russkaya natsiya* (nation of Russian citizens rather than ethnic Russian nation). In addition, statist politician like Vladislav Surkov (the author of "sovereign democracy") have spoken harshly against the divisive policies of aggressive nationalists.

“Even while the rhetoric of the statisticians’ foreign policy is not fully nationalistic, its substance is; its pursuit of ‘great power status’ is almost a national mission ...”

On the other hand, the statisticians' attitudes are proto-nationalistic because of their Soviet heritage. For instance, following Stalin, they are unable to regard their own nationalist inclinations self-critically: "nationalism" is a negative concept reserved for "extremist" anti-state actors while state policies are invariably "patriotic."²⁰ Moreover, owing to continuities in Tsarist and Marxist-Leninist security traditions, much of elite foreign policy thinking has "still displayed features of...renounced ideology."²¹ A persuasive argument sees the elite having less a coherent nationalist ideology than an engrained foreign policy "mindset" or "instinct" derived from a traditionalist Realpolitik mentality.²² This mindset emphasizes foreign (especially Western) threats and a zero-sum focus on geopolitics and "spheres of influence"—overall an illiberalism and naked realism.²³ In addition, since (unlike Westernizers) statisticians give scant regard to individual rather than group rights, it is "open to interpretation how Russocentric is the *rossiyskaya* nation."²⁴ Even while the rhetoric of the statisticians' foreign policy is not fully nationalistic, its substance is; its pursuit of "great power status" is almost a national mission, and it sees the state itself in quasi-nationalistic emotional and even spiritual terms. Moreover, the often-articulated tone of defiance articulates *ressentiment*, the sense of envy that reinforces particularistic pride and xenophobia as parts of national identity, which in Russia has been historically directed at the West.²⁵ As James Sherr has argued, "a feeling of *obida* (injury) at perceived humiliation by the West...became foundations of policy...at least as potent as Soviet ideology had been."²⁶ Overall, their mindset gives statisticians more elective affinity to the civilizationists than to Westernizers, and so they are not as equidistant between the two groups as Table 1 might indicate. This affinity potentially allows civilizationist ideas the means to affect foreign policy discourse.

During the Putin era, the potential for civilizationist ideas to influence elite discourse has increased in other ways, too. First, the foreign policymaking process has become more centralized since the Yeltsin era. This has had ambiguous effects: on the one hand, the Kremlin (in both domestic and foreign policy) is theoretically able to dictate a more unified foreign policy line and ignore civilizational nationalists to a greater degree than it did during the 1990s. On the other hand, the “black box” of the Kremlin is very difficult to observe. Foreign policymaking is restricted to a very narrow circle of trusted advisers and the presidential administration.²⁷ Naturally, this places an emphasis on personal connections, behind-the-scenes lobbying and other indirect forms of influence from which civilizationists might unduly benefit. For instance, it is argued that Aleksandr Dugin’s influence is “immense” among the Russian political establishment, while Putin’s favored journalist is Mikhail Leont’ev and his confessor is the nationalist priest Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov.²⁸ None of this is verifiable (and indeed it is hard to identify consistently neo-Eurasianist ideas in Putin’s public pronouncements), but it does indicate how the closed policy process might actually benefit nationalists with high levels of access.

Second, despite this centralization, public discourse is far from irrelevant in policymaking. Certainly, the Kremlin is known to be an assiduous analyst of public opinion. Indeed, Putin’s public image has deliberately co-opted liberal, Communist and nationalist ideas to serve his “father of the nation” status.²⁹ In this way, publicly articulated nationalist ideas can inform Kremlin policy. Indeed, it can be argued that the Kremlin’s nationalism is mainly an attempt to co-opt ideas that have a popular resonance in the service of regime goals.³⁰ So it is not unimportant that the State Duma (which, although it has minimal direct policy influence, still plays a large role in affecting political debate) has since 2003 been dominated by parties of a statist or civilizational nationalist inclination. The Duma parties’ “opposition” has been much constrained, and indeed these parties rarely dissent from Kremlin foreign policy except in a more nationalist direction, particularly in periods of perceived national existential crisis, during which time they effectively act as cheerleaders for the regime.

Third, under Putin, nationalism has played an increasingly important and coordinated function in both Russia’s foreign and domestic policy-formation. Just as the Kremlin’s approach to politics can be dubbed “managed pluralism” (the elite demarcates the broad boundaries of “healthy” democracy and periodically intervenes to maintain these boundaries), its approach to nationalism is “managed nationalism.”³¹ As I have explored in greater depth elsewhere, this managed nationalism consists of three interlocking spheres:³²

(1) *Official nationality*: so named because it is functionally equivalent to Tsarist Official Nationality—it is only quasi-nationalist (state interests are prior to the nation’s) and aims to co-opting “patriotic” sentiment in the interests of internal and external regime stability. It is reflected in official Kremlin statements, presidential addresses, and foreign policy doctrines that articulate the statist *gosudarstvennik* position. This is a relatively moderate, “European,” secular and pragmatic conservatism most cogently articulated in the doctrine of “sovereign democracy”: modernization and democratization *à la Russe*.

(2) *Cultural nationalism* is principally the mainstream intellectual and media discourse and symbols that aim to reinforce the historical, moral and social aspects of a distinct Russian “national” way of life and thereby build a sense of national solidarity.

(3) *Political nationalism* is simply domestic electoral and social mobilization centered around nationalist motifs.

Under Putin, the state has actively shaped the relationship between these three spheres: official nationality sets the parameters for the cultural and political sphere which are allowed some autonomy within (and even, occasionally, beyond) these limits as long as they do not fundamentally challenge it.

Finally, of most relevance to the Georgia case is that civilizational nationalism is allowed relatively free reign in the cultural and political spheres. This nationalism emphasizes the uniqueness of Russian “civilization” and contrasts it against the “other” (increasingly the West or pro-Western governments in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova).³³ It portrays Russia as a “besieged fortress”; the Russian authorities are the only force preventing national destruction, and the population needs to “rally round the flag” against external enemies that are motivated by “Russophobia.”³⁴ Given state control of the electronic media, which largely marginalizes non-loyal and liberal voices, a vicious circle of “civilizational nationalism” is created: the state helps create a media dominated by this nationalism, which then re-informs Kremlin policy. This civilizational nationalism often directly contradicts the pro-European, modernist and pragmatic elements of official nationality, but this contradiction has actually proved beneficial to the Russian elite, since such mechanisms “combine...openness to the West with effective discrediting of all Western voices by means of creating a virtual conflict with the West over a third area.”³⁵ Indeed, the elite has deliberately stoked anti-Westernism to these ends.

In addition, several interconnected think-tanks emerged during the 2000s that have promulgated the new statist and civilizational nationalism more widely. There is a huge cross-fertilization of personnel and ideas (for instance many of the “nationalist” think-tanks overlap with official structures around the dominant pro-presidential party United Russia), meaning that elite and nationalist views are in many cases one and the same, and often marginal nationalist views can come to more public prominence.³⁶ Although relatively Westernizing think-tanks (such as INSOR, the Carnegie Endowment or the Center for Political Technologies) still maintain a high profile (especially outside Russia), the proliferation of well-funded nationalist think-tanks and the dominance of nationalist discourse on state-run media means that these have tended to swim against public opinion: pro-Kremlin think-tanks flood the market with nationalist ideas.

From the mid-2000s, this domestic oversupply of civilizational nationalism meant that such ideas were increasingly visible even in official domestic *and* foreign policy. For example, despite the civic and multiethnic elements noted above, the dominant features of Russianness in Kremlin discourse (noted in particular in its strictures against the “falsification of history”) have become the “commitment to ... Russian culture: language, history, values of statehood and patriotism, the idea of the strong and great Russia, uniqueness of the Russian civilization.”³⁷ Economic growth underpinned an increasing Russian emphasis on “soft” power and attempts to promote Russian history and culture as a pole of attraction to compete with a West perceived to be declining.³⁸ Accordingly, Russia has used a number of mechanisms to project its values beyond its borders—from the *Russia Today* English-language TV channel, to the Paris and New York based Institute for Democracy and Cooperation; to the Russkiy Mir Foundation headed by Kremlin-connected Vyacheslav

Nikonov, which specializes in the promulgation of Russian language and culture beyond Russia's own borders.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin has demonstrated an overall reluctance to use extreme nationalism for sustained social mobilization, and seeks to periodically control it (for instance, by demoting the most articulate nationalist politicians like Dmitri Rogozin). Indeed, Boris Kagarlitskiy argues that the Kremlin is scared of "dangerous" nationalists like Dugin.³⁹ However, despite the official preference for enlightened patriotism, the Kremlin actually has few strong safeguards against unenlightened nationalism: the authorities' frequent repudiation of liberal democracy and the extinction of domestic liberalism gives an inbuilt bias toward illiberal versions of nationalism. Moreover, if theorists of nationalism are right, illiberal nationalism is inherent to authoritarian or semi-authoritarian systems, which lack the representative institutions and cultures of compromise that might "digest" nationalism into milder forms. As Michael Mann argues "Mild nationalism...is democracy achieved, aggressive nationalism is democracy perverted."⁴⁰

The ensuing sections will show exactly this. Over time, the infusion of formerly marginal civilizationist sentiments into mainstream Russian thinking in the 2000s began strongly to frame elite thinking toward Georgia. This led to a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby Georgia was repeatedly denigrated as itself an aggressive, nationalistic, weak, untrustworthy and profoundly hostile state and a pawn of nefarious Western geopolitical interests. The Russian elite became predisposed to seeing the worst in Georgian intentions and to preparing accordingly. Ultimately, "liberal" Medvedev took the "aggressive" response of "coercing Georgia to peace" in order to demonstrate his "patriotism" to an expectant public, and thus took a position virtually indistinguishable from that of civilizationists.

The Domestic Civilizationists

Russia's civilizationists have maintained a consistent and inflexible position regarding Georgia. Indeed, most of their contemporary sentiments were already evident in the early 1990s when high-level politicians such as Supreme Soviet Chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov and MP Sergei Baburin expressed open sympathy for the secession of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adzhara from Georgia on the basis of their historical ties with Russia which had (in their view) always acted as the guarantor of their statehood.⁴¹ Georgian policy under its first post-Soviet president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was widely regarded as aggressively nationalist even by neutral observers.⁴² Nevertheless, the Russian nationalists went further, arguing that Georgia had committed "genocide" against the Abkhaz and South Ossetians in 1992–1993, and was itself an inherently nationalist and aggressive state. Yet they maintained an unswerving hostility toward Georgia's second president, Eduard Shevardnadze, for his alleged complicity in the collapse of the USSR. Politicians like Sergei Baburin developed close ties with the Abkhaz leadership in particular, often visited the region, and allegedly assisted them with supplies (including arms).⁴³ In doing so, they joined forces with elements of the Russian military in intervening directly to provide military support and training for the Abkhaz.⁴⁴ After the ceasefire in 1993, the civilizationists mainly affected Russia's relations with Georgia by the blocking tactics of the Communists and nationalists in the otherwise ineffectual Duma. Above all, the Duma blocked the ratification of the 1994 Georgian–Russian Friendship Treaty and an additional treaty in 1995.⁴⁵

These nationalists have consistently seen Georgia as a troublemaker and zone of instability. They were utterly unimpressed by its "so-called democracy"—Aleksandr Dugin

saw Georgia as a failed state, while Vladimir Zhirinovskiy regarded it as a complete US client that falsified its elections.⁴⁶ As might be expected, the civilizationists regarded the Rose Revolution profoundly negatively from its outset, seeing it as destabilizing for the whole North Caucasus region, and a foothold for US influence in the region. They were also instinctively hostile to Saakashvili, viewing him as a American puppet whose real masters resided in Washington; they took the lead in denigrating him as a “mad and bad” Hitler- or Pinochet-style dictator.⁴⁷ Nor did they conceal their revanchist aims, basically supporting a policy of divide and rule against Georgia and its forcible incorporation within the Russian sphere of influence. As politicians like Zhirinovskiy and Dugin argued, this could be achieved simply by the recognition of the unrecognized entities and military action against Saakashvili.

Official Discourses Concerning Georgia

Until the Putin period, such civilizationist views were officially marginalized in the Duma. The Yeltsin administration (although not the military high command, which detested him) maintained largely benign relations with Shevardnadze and usually simply ignored parliamentary outrage. It gave official support to Georgian territorial integrity and supported multilateral mechanisms for achieving autonomy for the unrecognized entities within the Georgian state. However, official rhetoric masked an essentially pro-Abkhaz approach at the “implementation level,” whereby unofficial support for the separatists was used to keep Georgia firmly in the Russian sphere of influence and hinder resolution of the “frozen conflicts.”⁴⁸ Moreover, the benign approach continued only as long as Georgia accepted Russian protégés in its power ministries—once Georgia demurred, the benign policies stopped.⁴⁹

It is easy to forget that Moscow’s view of Tbilisi had already started to deteriorate markedly before the Rose Revolution and that this revolution was not as pivotal as some accounts suggest.⁵⁰ Georgia’s orientation toward NATO membership from 2002 onward was critical in this evolution, as were disputes about alleged Georgian support for Chechen separatists residing in the Pankisi Gorge in Northern Georgia.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Moscow was, initially at least, not nearly as critically disposed toward Saakashvili in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution as the nationalists were, and hoped for an improvement in relations.⁵² Indeed, Moscow was sufficiently pragmatic in 2003–2004 to intercede on Saakashvili’s behalf to facilitate first Shevardnadze’s peaceful resignation and later that of Aslan Abashidze, whom Saakashvili unseated as president of Adzhara.

By 2005–2006, the decline in mutual relations was evident: the initial flashpoint was a dispute about smuggling, but geopolitical rivalry after the Orange Revolution and Saakashvili’s marked tilt westward and poor personal relations with Putin were more lasting catalysts.⁵³ Clearly, the August conflict cannot be understood without the prospect of Georgia’s entry into NATO and the Western recognition of Kosovo in 2007–2008, which Moscow continually portrayed as an unacceptable Western geopolitical demarche that would encourage separatism in the CIS.

Alongside this mutual antipathy, official Moscow increasingly began to share the nationalist view of both the Georgian state—and Saakashvili personally—as unstable and aggressive. Putin’s personal distaste for Saakashvili became evident (albeit he reserved his most choice expressions, such as “hanging him by the balls,” for private conversation).⁵⁴ As with Ukraine, Moscow often denigrated any “democratic”

achievements of the coloured revolution. In the doctrine of “sovereign democracy” promulgated largely between 2005 and 2007, Georgia and Ukraine were the archetypes of non-sovereign states, with formal democratic procedures but *de facto* governed from abroad (by the US).

However, even until early 2008, Moscow’s official rhetoric upheld the virtues of international law and Georgian territorial integrity. Yet, as later became evident, the *de facto* rhetorical and material support for the unrecognized entities increased exponentially; most notably the passportization of the Abkhaz and Ossetians, which later allowed Georgian residents to be regarded as not just compatriots but as Russian citizens; similarly, visa restrictions against Georgians (which excluded residents of separatist areas) undermined Georgian territorial integrity. Above all, Russia increasingly directly appointed its own security service personnel to the government in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For example, the former Military Commander of Perm’ *oblast’* Vasilii Lunev became South Ossetian Minister of Defence in March 2008.⁵⁴ More and more, Russia recognized the separatist entities’ rights to “self-determination” and separatist leaders were increasingly described as fully-fledged Presidents and granted state visits to Moscow.⁵⁵

The Cross-Fertilization of Discourses

At a rhetorical and even implementation level, then, the Russian authorities were increasingly coming to share some of the proclivities of the civilizationists. The *de facto* cross-fertilization of discourses became most evident in the anti-Georgian campaign of October-November 2006, which was “the first incident of officially endorsed ethnic discrimination in contemporary Russia.”⁵⁶

The campaign was initially prompted by a diplomatic spat over the Georgian arrest of Russian “spies” and their provocative display on Georgian TV on September 27, 2006. A Soviet-type campaign ensued with some Aesopian signals from the top. In early October, Putin declared the need for regional authorities to “protect the interests of Russian manufacturers and Russia’s native population” in the country’s outdoor markets.⁵⁷ This was taken as code for the harassment of (particularly Georgian) immigrants by local officials and extreme nationalist groups alike, since a central theme of the campaign was that of Georgian criminality. In particular, the Georgian diaspora was portrayed as providing the financial support for Georgian aggression against Russia. Official measures were taken centrally with coordinated activity against “illegal” immigrants. The Russian Migration Service had to deny reports that it was setting up a special department for Georgians.⁵⁸ The police in several regions demanded lists of pupils with “Georgian surnames” in schools. Mass deportations followed, alongside several deaths in custody. Notable too was the targeting of not only Georgian citizens, but of Russian citizens of Georgian origin, such as the author Boris Akunin (Grigorii Chkhartishvili). The campaign was supported even by (relatively) moderate pro-state media like *Izvestiya*. More remarkable was that extreme nationalist groups interpreted the campaign as official endorsement for their actions (for example, the Movement Against Illegal Immigration declared that it was ready to help the regime “rid the country of Georgians.”⁵⁹)

This campaign ran out of the control of its initiators and had to be reined back—partly due to the habitual practice of lower levels of the Russian bureaucracy to over-fulfil the plan. But xenophobic statements by both the state-run media and law-enforcement experts

showed that engrained nationalism was directly responsible for instituting an atmosphere of hysteria.⁶⁰ Yet even the Eurasianist commentator Mikhail Leont'ev soon declared on his Channel 1 program *Odnako* that the idea of closing Georgian restaurants and mass expulsion of Georgians was “stupid” and the campaign was directed not against Georgians (while admitting that it aimed to help Georgians get rid of “parasites” like Saakashvili themselves).⁶¹ The Russian Public Chamber condemned the campaign on October 12, and it had run out of steam by November, after Putin on October 26 announced that “ethnically motivated” law enforcement actions were “inadmissible.”⁶² This indicated that the authorities’ exploitation of ethnic sentiment from the top had led to an autonomous “demand from the bottom” which the Kremlin had to deflate lest it lost the nationalist agenda. However, this campaign directly inspired the anti-Estonian campaign of March 2007, which marked a new degree of coordination and sophistication.

In evaluating the role of Russian nationalism in the build-up to August 2008, one must note that there were other rationales for Moscow’s conduct. Certainly, the conflict clearly fulfilled some of Russia’s longterm military and security aims (and many of these were already articulated even under Yeltsin when the Westernizers dominated foreign policy making): namely its determined opposition to Georgian NATO membership, its insistence on primacy in its sphere of influence and fundamental opposition to pro-Western centrifugal tendencies in the CIS.⁶³ Moreover, the generally convincing argument that Russia had been planning the war for months or years should not necessarily lead to ignoring that the EU, US and Georgia itself wittingly or unwittingly escalated Moscow’s actions (this ignorance was widespread in the statements of some Western and Georgian politicians in the immediate aftermath).⁶⁴ Certainly, Western negligence played a role, as did Georgia’s own nationalism and a cycle of provocations on both sides.⁶⁵ Moreover, Russia’s self-serving arguments that Medvedev had little choice but to pursue military intervention and recognition of the separatist entities in response to attacks on its compatriots cannot simply be dismissed. Arguably, as a new president widely derided as a liberal figleaf with little domestic or foreign legitimacy, Medvedev’s own political position would have been critically weakened had he not defended Russian “citizens.”⁶⁶

What is vital, though, is that Russian domestic discourse had increasingly framed the conflict in such a way that Moscow felt it had no option but to respond with such a hard line. In this, Russian civilizational nationalism played a direct role in provoking domestic sentiments to which the Kremlin felt it had to respond. This arguably increased Russia incentives to use the conflict to teach the West and Georgia a lesson and to show that it demanded respect as a regional and global player. Certainly, the civilizationists played a significant role in escalating internal and external tension. Nationalist forces outside and inside parliament (especially the LDPR and Communists) called repeatedly for recognition of the unrecognized entities throughout 2008, and were only partly assuaged when Moscow upgraded relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in April 2008 (this itself ratcheted up expectations that would be difficult to de-escalate later). One of the most prominent troublemakers, Aleksandr Dugin, visited South Ossetia several times in 2008, when his Eurasian Youth Movement helped train the Ossetian militias and participated in sporadic fighting.⁶⁷ Dugin repeatedly expressed his preference for the military invasion of Georgia, occupation of Tbilisi and partitioning of the Georgian state. In the aftermath of the conflict, he continued to inflate the number of South Ossetian deaths and called for imperial renaissance and incorporation of Georgia within the Russian sphere

of influence: “Georgia must orientate itself toward Russia, not in order to get back its irredeemably lost territories, but in order not to lose its remaining ones.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Mikhail Leont’ev used his *Odnako* program to disparage American values and the idea of a “world community” and attack Saakashvili as a “reptile” and “war criminal.”⁶⁹

As Sakwa notes, domestic anti-Western sentiment has ebbed and flowed, but the tide tends to be higher after each ebb.⁷⁰ Not coincidentally, therefore, George W. Bush and Mikheil Saakashvili were regarded in Russian public opinion as Russia’s chief enemies long before August 2008. More generally, Russian discourse over Georgia conformed to long-rehearsed patterns of rallying round the flag against foreign enemies: in the aftermath of the conflict, both Medvedev and Putin emphasized the geopolitical roots of the war and the prime role of US interests in Georgia. Notably, Medvedev got some of his strongest support from civilizationists who had previously regarded him as “toothless.” For example, *Zavtra* regarded Medvedev as an up-and-coming independent and authoritative politician.⁷¹ August 2008 marks the peak of symbiosis between the authorities, nationalists and the wider population. The Kremlin hit its population with a media barrage—“the Russian focus was on the domestic audience and the state-directed electronic media went into overdrive to present the Kremlin’s case to its people.”⁷² This was successful: both Putin and Medvedev reached historically high levels of popular approval in September 2008 (88 percent and 83 percent, respectively, according to Levada Center surveys⁷³).

Most significantly, in the aftermath of August 2008, elite and nationalist discourses toward Georgia became virtually indistinguishable in their analysis of the origins and outcomes of the war (if not quite the longer-term strategic lessons). Both quickly consolidated around a discourse of Georgian “aggression” against a defensive and unoccupied South Ossetian population. Both Medvedev and Putin described the alleged death of 2,000 South Ossetians as “genocide.” Georgians in general and Saakashvili in particular were war criminals, firing on peacekeepers and unarmed inhabitants in dead of night.

Even though the Russian prosecutor general quickly revised the number of South Ossetian civilian deaths drastically downward to 162, this information was not widely publicized, and the shared civilizationist discourse has continued to be dominant domestically, with only marginal changes and nuances.⁷⁴ This is not to deny that a number of Russian analysts have been extremely critical of the Russian military conduct during the war, even including prominent Russian civilizationist Aleksandr Prokhanov, who argued that (in military strategy) at least Russia actually lost.⁷⁵ However, these analysts largely ignore political questions.

The shared Russian discourse continues to ignore the historical roots of the conflict in general, and any Russian culpability in particular. Such historical narrative refers only to previous Georgian atrocities in the 1990s and to Georgian “aggression” in the 2000s. A number of Russian publications and films (e.g. *The War of 08.08.08: The Art of Betrayal*) reinforce an emotional message, focussing on Russian solidarity with the beleaguered population of “Tskhinval” and convey incredulity at the (alleged) criminal and inhuman barbarity of the Georgian forces (trained and funded by the US).⁷⁶ Images of Saakashvili chewing his tie or cowering in terror at the approach of a Russian jet are repeatedly shown to indicate the cowardliness and rashness of the Georgian side.

Russian commentators continue to insist that not just intervention into Georgia, but even Russian recognition of secessionist entities, was absolutely inevitable and forced upon Russia by Georgian aggression. Intervention is regarded as a moral, humanitarian

issue in order to defend Russian citizens (partly following NATO's rationale for intervention in Kosovo). For example, Vyacheslav Nikonov regards the event (with a much over-used phrase) as "Russia's 9/11"—i.e. an existential challenge to which any viable state would have to respond.⁷⁷ Even neo-Eurasianist Aleksandr Dugin regards intervention as more a moral than geopolitical issue (although geopolitics are not absent, since he regards Georgia as a Eurasian, not European, civilization, whose national interests lie with Russia).⁷⁸ Most mainstream Russian commentators regard recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as an incontrovertible fact than can in no circumstances be reversed (the non-recognition of these states by most of the international community is either simply ignored or regarded as temporary). The salient fact is that Russia, by showing it can stand up for its interests irrespective of global opinion, has transformed from a post-Soviet to a global power as part of a newly multi-polar system, and that Washington suffered a strategic defeat.⁷⁹

Even the publication of the EU's Tagliavini report in November 2009 did not change the dominant narrative. Although balanced coverage was present,⁸⁰ official Russian discussion focussed largely on Georgia's culpability for the outbreak of hostilities and said virtually nothing about the report's disputation of any evidence of genocide of South Ossetia, its allegations of ethnic cleansing of Georgians there, or its conclusion that Russian intervention was not legally justified in the first place and was disproportionate in its result. In this regard, an October 2009 edition of the *Sudite Sami* program on Channel 1, hosted by Maxim Shevchenko, was instructive: only Carnegie Foundation analyst Aleksei Malashenko differed (and then only marginally) from the general consensus that Georgia was entirely culpable for the conflict (even planning it in advance), that recognition of the separatist entities was inevitable, and that (in MP Sergei Markov's view) the Tagliavini report "inflicts a colossal blow on the Saakashvili regime."⁸¹

Table 2 shows the spectrum of Russian and Western views of the conflict. While Table 1 showed that statist and civilizationist approaches still differ in the conceptual underpinnings of foreign policy, they are fused almost into one when it comes to the specific issue of Georgia. In essence, they share a common understanding of the overall Georgia-Russia relationship, the August 2008 conflict's causes and immediate outcomes. Big differences are evident only in their proposed solutions; extreme civilizationists such as Dugin call for an imperialist, expansionist policy toward Georgia, Ukraine and other CIS states, whereas official views focus on preservation of the post-conflict status quo of a weakened non-NATO Georgia alongside proposals to revise European security institutions. However, even these distinctions sometimes prove hard to draw when prominent establishment politicians like Andrei Kokoshin, deputy leader of the pro-Putin United Russia party's Duma fraction, have argued that the only "disproportionality" of the Russian response in August 2008 was that it was "too soft" and did not make a Yugoslav-style strike against Georgian infrastructure.⁸² There are arguably far greater nuances—and even disagreements—in Western positions. While the consensus of Western analysis is that Russia wanted and planned the war, there are evident differences between what might be called "Messianic Westernizers," those who (like John McCain and Mikheil Saakashvili) have a Manichean view of good Georgia vs. evil Russia, and the "Moderate Westernizers," who impute blame more impartially (although the Messianic view was dominant in the war's aftermath, the moderate view has become the consensus).

TABLE 2. Divergent Russian/Western foreign policy images: Russia-Georgia relations

Variable	Messianic Westernizers	Moderate Westernizers	Statists	Civilizationists
Location	Georgia: US pro-Georgia lobby; Russian liberals	EU; Obama administration; Some Russian liberals	Russian establishment	Pro-establishment media; nationalist politicians
Nature of Georgian state	Beacon of democracy	Flawed democracy	Unstable, non-sovereign state	Failed state
Russia's aims in Georgia	Imperialist aggression	Aggressive pursuit of sphere-of-influence	Pragmatic co-operation; Sphere-of-influence	Russian dependency; Sphere-of-influence
Causes of Russia-Georgia War	Russian aggression and 'trap'	Russian provocation/invasion; Georgian over-reaction	Georgian aggression/genocide; Russian humanitarian intervention/self-defence	Georgian genocide; Russian humanitarian intervention/self-defence
Consequences of Five-day war	Existential challenge to Euro-Atlantic institutions	Regional destabilization; problematic Russia-West relations	Regional stability; need to re-think European security	Regional stability; Weakening of Euro-Atlantic alliance
Attitude to Saakashvili	Exemplary democrat	Flawed democrat	(War) criminal	War criminal/ Fascist
Future dynamics of Russia-Georgia relationship	Need for principled Western/NATO containment of Russian expansionism	Need for confidence-building and protection of Georgian sovereignty; NATO membership postponed	Georgian sovereignty respected within post-conflict borders; Russia-Georgia relations to resume post-Saakashvili	Post-conflict borders the first stage in Russian imperial renaissance

In the lead-up to and aftermath of the war, the civilizationist approach spilled into foreign policy rhetoric to an unprecedented degree. In August 2008, Medvedev's demands that the Georgian government respect the Russian government, its people *and its values* indicated the increasing projection of a "sense of grievance into its foreign policy."⁸³ More notably, Medvedev's July 2008 foreign policy concept mentioned, for the first time, global politics taking on a "civilizational dimension," giving civilizationist foreign policy stances the doctrinal legitimacy that they had previously lacked.⁸⁴

However, whether this is a longterm tendency remains ambiguous. Since the peak of the conflict, Moscow's official rhetoric has become more restrained and less incendiary. The word "genocide" has been dropped from high-level discourse and the

emphasis has been on rationality and common interests. As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, the only ideology determining foreign policy is “common sense and the supremacy of international law.”⁸⁵ In December 2008, Medvedev added that Russia and the West *shared* the same values (even if they were mutually misunderstood), which directly repudiates civilizationism.⁸⁶ Even during the conflict, Medvedev was at pains not to repeat the pogrom-like campaign of 2006 by insisting on the political, not ethnic basis of the conflict, and has since repeatedly warned against domestic nationalist extremism. Moscow’s policy toward Georgia has now changed into a charm offensive among the Georgian population, with Medvedev stressing Russia’s centuries-old friendship with ordinary Georgians.

Nevertheless, in substance, Moscow’s policies have changed little. The Kremlin has expanded its attempts to delegitimize the Georgian “regime,” which it continues to regard as criminal, and now largely ignores except when it can embarrass it (for example, by promising to build a replica of the demolished Kutaisi war monument in Moscow⁸⁷). Medvedev openly stated that he regarded Saakashvili as a “political corpse.”⁸⁸ Russia continues to blame Georgia for fomenting terrorism in the North Caucasus—a troubling development given increasing instability there. Moscow also uses methods tried and tested in other West-leaning CIS states, namely courting potential pro-Russian “fifth columnists” (such as former parliamentary speaker Nino Burdzhanelidze and former Prime Minister Zurab Nogaideli) and hosting congresses of Georgian citizens in Moscow. This approach might offer a resumption of relations after Saakashvili demits office; however, it provides no long-term solution if a new Georgian president also seeks to leave Russia’s self-appointed sphere of influence. Certainly, direct Russian involvement in the politics of Ukraine, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan has, if anything, increased since 2008, and indicates that this sphere of influence is alive and well.

Georgia remains a deep irritant in Russian–Western relations, but as part of the “reset” there is agreement not to let this problem hinder other priorities. Indicatively, the draft new foreign policy concept leaked to *Russian Newsweek* in May 2010 prioritizes business and business-like links with the West and sidelines the Georgian issue entirely (it does not even mention Georgia directly, although it does argue the need to “actively oppose the attempts of extra-regional forces to interfere in Russia’s relations with CIS countries”).⁸⁹ Therefore, perhaps the truest difference between statist and civilizationist foreign policy views is that for the statist, nationalism is far less consistently interesting than money. Yet this is one more reason to be cautious about the reset: as Jeffrey Mankoff argues, “it is impossible to separate the new direction in foreign policy from the economic downturn” that has undermined Russian self-confidence and has forced it to reengage with the West. With oil prices now rising again and the Russian economy growing, it remains an open question as to whether Russia will continue to play nice: it’s notable that no new foreign policy concept has yet been *officially* endorsed.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Clearly, then, the dynamics of the relationship between nationalism and foreign policy under Putin and Medvedev have changed over time. The constant is the dominance of statist nationalists in policymaking, who have periodically exploited forms of more aggressive, ethnocentric civilizational nationalism in an instrumental way. This nationalism is dominant in the domestic media, and its primary purpose appears to be for domestic

legitimacy. However, nationalist *ressentiment* has long been a serviceable part of the statist's rhetorical arsenal in foreign policy, too—the image of offended, “principled,” anger can be an effective one.

However, in the mid-to-late 2000s the domestic oversupply of civilizational nationalism and the undersupply of more liberal variants increasingly began to influence and directly contaminate Russian foreign policy on both a rhetorical and a conceptual level. Russian foreign policy toward Georgia is one area in which the nationalist tiger momentarily escaped the cage, with official and civilizationist discourses becoming increasingly intertwined, indistinguishable and self-reinforcing. The key influence of this nationalism on the conflict with Georgia was providing a framing ideology: Russia increasingly saw Georgia as an illegitimate, hostile and aggressive state that needed to be taught a lesson lest its conduct fundamentally damage Russia's great-power status. Moreover, it provided a favourable domestic context whereby no alternative to Russia's actions was conceivable—the nationalists were prominent in creating an atmosphere of extreme jingoism that pushed Moscow to go further still.

So far, this narrative corroborates and deepens Ronald Asmus's view of a nationalistic and revisionist Russia. However, this view should be qualified: as authors like Astrid Tuminez indicate, historically extreme nationalism has rarely directly *driven* Russian conduct; rather the elite attempts to manipulate it for its own ends and to suppress it when it becomes destabilizing. Certainly, the Putin-Medvedev administrations have never consistently nor completely based either their domestic or foreign conduct on extreme nationalism. In particular, as Medvedev's attempts to limit domestic anti-Georgian sentiment show, the Kremlin remains very reluctant fully to endorse social mobilization around nationalist motivations. Since 2008, Russia has once again tried to move its foreign policy toward a more pragmatic, interest-based policy that indicates its continued fundamental hesitancy about prioritizing the role of ideas and values in international relations (even when these values are Russia's own). Overall, this indicates that the Russia-Georgia War was a brief but significant *deviation* from the general historical relationship between Russian nationalism and foreign policy, but this historical relationship was reinstated after 2009.

Whether this will fundamentally change the role of nationalism in Russian foreign policy in future is still unclear. The Kremlin is playing a dangerous game by using nationalism as a resource that can be switched on and off administratively to suit regime goals. In the late 2000s, the relationship between nationalism and foreign policy became somewhat dialectical—manipulating nationalism domestically stoked it to a degree that raised public expectations and risked driving elite responses (as indeed it did in the anti-Georgian campaign of 2006). Certainly, there is little in Russian domestic discourse since 2008 to indicate that the nationalist tiger has been securely caged, let alone tamed.

Whereas the Weimar Russia scenario (extreme nationalist takeover) remains very much an unlikely worst-case;⁹¹ more probable is a continued incompatibility between the Russian authorities' declared foreign policy goals (interest-based, pragmatic, multilateral) and domestic aims (values-based, subjective, unilateral) which will cause contradictions and severe tensions for both, particularly given Russia's declared interests in “resetting” international relations and modernizing domestically. August 2008 shows that resolving these tensions with a more consistently civilizationist nationalist

policy is highly tempting for the authorities, particularly where it has a free hand in its sphere of influence. Although the longer-term gains of such a policy are likely counterproductive, it would be a direct result of the structure of the domestic political system, in particular its lack of developed democracy and liberal nationalism. A more democratic Russia would still most likely have national interests very distinct from other democracies (compare France and the US). However, if Michael Mann is right, the only long-term solution to a zero-sum, assertive and “aggressive” nationalism “is to achieve democracy—especially federal, inter-regional democracy.” He adds however: “Unfortunately, this is easier said than done.”⁹² So, as with many other policy fields, a genuine resetting of Russian–Western relations will depend in large part on the genuine modernization of Russian domestic policy.

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IN TODAY'S BLOGS

Anti-Militarist
Andrew Bacevich
Unreported Iran
Roya Hakakian
Obama's First Year
Joshua Muravchik
Missing Bush in India
James Kirchick
Does the World Need Oprah?
Martha Bayles
Obama Italian-Style
Judy Bachrach

On Obama's Year One
Robert Kagan, Charles Lane, Ed Pilkington

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Ahmadinejad: No One Can Isolate Iran
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Brown: Labor Party Must Change the World Again

French Troops Tried to Bribe Taliban
Quagmire, Afghanistan
Pakistan Does Not Need US
The National, Abu Dhabi
Obama Not to Blame for Stalled Peace Talks
Haaretz, Israel
Assassination Attempt in Guinea
allAfrica.com, South Africa
Karadzic on Trial, Analysis
BIRN, Bosnia

China's Peacekeeping Role
Intl Peace Research Institute, Sweden
Corruption Barometer
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