

# **Russia's Virtual War Against Georgia**

## **Risks of a PR Offensive**

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Georgia is the only post-Soviet neighbor—and, in fact, the only country in the world—with which Russia has a protracted and carefully cultivated political conflict that periodically escalates and generates serious military tension. Russian president Vladimir Putin's "no-holds-barred" ultimatum of September 11 created the impression of an imminent war, averted only by his friendly chat with Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze at the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) summit on October 5, 2001. Mutual commitment to sustaining this detente can by no means be taken for granted; the conflict deserves a more sober and less partial explanation than most of those currently made available by the media market. The lack of objective reporting in the Russia media in and of itself is a significant part of the problem.

### **Putin's Chessboards and Gambits**

The central point of departure for further analysis is that Putin does not, and indeed cannot, have a game plan for the Georgian conflict because he is not playing the Georgia or even the Caucasus game. He has elected to play three big games simultaneously, seeking to maximize his strength by transferring assets from one board to another. These three games are: alliance-making with the United States; bridge building toward Europe; and power consolidating within the country. Having demonstrated sustained attention and remarkable flexibility, Putin has been very quick to exploit every small point he has earned at the U.S. table (for instance, by ignoring the OPEC signals to decrease significantly oil production) to advance his game at the Europe table (for example, by seeking U.S. support for pressing the European Union (EU) on the Kaliningrad issue). We can take note of the interesting fact that in Russia's energy export strategy, oil is more important for gaining U.S. attention, while gas is central for rapprochement with Europe; further elaboration inevitably goes far beyond the scope of this analysis.

Two features of this three-boarded game should be emphasized. First, internal power building takes precedence over all other activities, because Putin is aware that his performance in Brussels or Washington is dependent on his ability to control his own domain. Therefore, crude manipulation of elections, rigid control over media, and extermination of environmentalist or academic "spies" continue even if disapproving noises follow from the West. While often referring to Russia's belonging to the Western/European civilization, Putin seeks to utilize this vocation to uphold his own

vertical power. The October 23–26 hostage crisis in Moscow has visibly increased the determination to rigidify internal control, dismissing any residual Western criticism.

Second, CIS does not constitute an independent game table; it is just a variable entirely dependent on fluid situations on the three main boards. Many might, perhaps, disagree with such a proposition, citing either Russia's eternal imperialist drive, or Putin's many official statements confirming the centrality of the post-Soviet space for Russia's policies, or both. All multilateral and bilateral relations inside this space, however, remain a net drain on Russia's power, and Putin the pragmatist meticulously takes note of these negative cost-efficiency estimates.

Putin never subscribed to the notion of the CIS as an integrationist-type organization, and he limits his involvement in it to handling key bilateral relations. If anything could be discerned from such a non-event as the October CIS summit in Chishinau, Moldova, it is a shift in Moscow's strategy in this space from manipulating conflicts (as in the early 1990s) to manipulating presidents. However, it is only a second-priority strategy; while cornering Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko in a brotherly reunification sparring match or embracing Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma, despite international ostracism, Putin is very careful to prevent any negative fallout on Russia's relations with the United States or Europe. We can even stretch this point slightly to register Putin's swift embrace of the ongoing transformation of international security structures where institutions are quickly losing their relevance and networking becomes the key organizational principle. Bureaucratic hierarchies still dominate the landscape but issues are traveling along Hogwarts-style moving staircases. While NATO is agonizing over the redundancy of its clumsy machinery in the U.S.-led war against terrorism, Putin is quick to grasp the value of flexible ad hoc coalitions and much prefers instant gratification to permanent alliances.

How does all this maneuvering connect with impoverished and mismanaged Georgia? Putin exploits this constructed conflict primarily in the internal political arena, and the context for this manipulation is crystal clear: the Chechen war. Firmly (and sometimes brutally) controlling the media, he had been able to keep it a low-profile war, until it arrived in Moscow yet again. Society is slowly but surely turning against this protracted bloodbath, and the hostage tragedy has not broken this trend. Putin has been able to limit the damage to his leadership, but he has committed himself to a "forceful solution" and cannot wish the war away. By orchestrating a series of public relations (PR) campaigns against Georgia, Putin was shifting public attention away from failures in Chechnya and at the same time checking elite mobilization. The results on this test are quite satisfactory for him: except for a few incurable liberals (Grigorii Yavlinskii deserves praise for his firm stance), politicians, bureaucrats, and independent experts eagerly joined ranks for a virtual offensive against Georgia.

This remarkable consensus gives Putin more opportunities to play the Georgian issue in the big game with the United States. Moscow has reasons to be worried that its value as a member of the anti-terrorist coalition has sharply declined since the collapse of the Taliban regime. Seeking to extract the maximum price for washing its hands over Iraq in the United Nations Security Council, Moscow also tries to create situations that might keep Washington's peripheral attention. The deployment of U.S. military instructors in

Georgia creates a perfect opportunity, because, as Rajan Menon observed in the Central Asian context, engagement and entrapment are two sides of the same coin. As a parallel, Moscow is trying to indicate that unstable Georgia is hardly a reliable route for transporting Caspian oil, while Russia's own capacities—advertised aggressively at the energy summit in Houston in early October—are a much better alternative. This oil connection remains, however, only a secondary line in the intrigue, so the timing of Putin's ultimatum to Georgia had everything to do with tactical preemption of Bush's ultimatum to Iraq. It coincided with the beginning of the construction work on the Baku-Tbilisi-Cheyhan pipeline, which constitutes a smoking gun for every geopolitically challenged analyst, but was apparently just a coincidence.

As for the European game, Georgia has a more subtle profile here and serves mostly as a reminder that as the EU assumes main responsibility for stabilizing the Balkans, Russia has to carry the same burden regarding the Caucasus. Giving the Europeans a new target for voicing their concerns (and even pretending that it responds to those concerns), Moscow firmly dismisses residual criticism of brutalities of the Chechen war by placing it squarely in the terrorist context. It is in Europe that Putin wants to sell the argument that Shevardnadze, with his corrupt authoritarian rule, is a major part of the problem, and a regime change in Georgia would be as healthy as it was in Croatia and indeed Serbia. A more straightforward version of the same argument for U.S. consumption goes like this: The old cheat is using you, pal.

Substantive rather than stylistic differences in these policies might indicate that Russia is playing significantly different games on each of the three main tables; although every analogy is flawed, it appears possible to suggest that Putin plays poker with the United States, chess with Europe, and perhaps billiards in his own domain.

## **Lieutenants and Minions Play Along**

There is certainly a sea of difference between Yeltsin's chaotic foreign policy where every bureaucracy was allowed to pursue its own interests notwithstanding orders from the top and Putin's tightly run ship where insubordination is simply unheard of. Nevertheless, the current leader is unable to organize a well-coordinated team united by a common sense of purpose and coherent strategic guidelines. In reality, the Kremlin is populated by a bunch of bitterly competing sycophants who are eager to anticipate (often wrongly) Putin's next move in his big games and to carry out his orders (often beyond the boundaries of common sense), adjusting accordingly the never-ending pursuit of their own particular interests.

Georgia makes a perfect example of these cockroach races. Sensing Putin's dissatisfaction with Shevardnadze's desperately pro-U.S. behavior, the rank and file of Moscow's political elite rushed to attack Georgia with every available PR weapon. A slight pause followed Putin's "this-is-not-a-tragedy" April statement on the arrival of U.S. military trainers, but as the political summer holidays came to the end, a hunting season on the Georgian Old Fox has opened in Moscow.

It does not take penetrating insight to find all sorts of parochial interests in this massive offensive. The military, who certainly have a big stake in this campaign, are primarily using Georgia in general and the Pankisi Gorge in particular to explain its

inability to deliver a victory in Chechnya. But even experimenting with unidentified aircraft that bombed Georgian villages, the Ministry of Defense and the general staff are, in fact, quite reluctant to go for a real horizontal escalation of war due to inability to sustain operations on the expanded theater. The Federal Security Service is eager to jump on every opportunity to cover its failure to prevent the terrorist attack in Moscow. It is also engaged in complicated maneuvering around Shevardnadze's succession but would hate to see any consolidation of his position due to the threat of external aggression.

Minor actors exploit their mini-opportunities. Thus, the semi-independent gas company *Itera* has used the crisis to overcome Georgian resistance to a deal that grants it control over the gas distribution system. A particularly distinguished example is Evgenii Nazdratenko, former governor of Primorskii Krai and currently the chairman of the State Fisheries Committee, who accused Shevardnadze of high treason for agreeing back in 1990 (when he was foreign minister of the USSR) to a maritime delimitation with the United States in the Bering Sea, seeking first and foremost to cover his questionable deals with fish distribution quotas. Many senators and State Duma deputies have been eager to elaborate this claim at a series of hearings, expecting to score a few cheap points for their patriotic fervor.

A further examination of this anti-Georgian elite consensus (which has far from solid support in public opinion) is certain to reveal more peculiar combinations of career, electoral, and bureaucratic interests, but the point here is a different one. The net sum of all these PR attacks and virtual wars seriously affects Putin's original games and takes them much further than a rational calculation would prescribe. Even being a quintessential control freak, he finds it difficult to restrain his over-enthusiastic entourage, and so again and again finds himself in situations where armed conflict appears to be a logical next step. What sometimes appears to be an overreaction or a use of excessive pressure on Putin's part is in fact a natural product of the system of decisionmaking that he has developed and fine-tuned himself.

## **What is in the Cards?**

The next few moves in Putin's big games are actually quite readable, but cumulatively they create a near imperative: it is time to get serious about Georgia. In the high-stakes poker game with the United States, Putin's bluffs have been called, and he will have to drop his opposition to U.S. pressure on Iraq. After that, for all intents and purposes, he has very little to contribute and can only collect from the much smaller Georgian racket that he himself has linked to the global anti-terrorist enterprise.

On the European chessboard, Putin has received only symbolic compensation for all the efforts invested in breaking the Kaliningrad impasse. (We can note in brackets that, whatever the irritation in Brussels over the politicization of this issue, Romano Prodi's statement that Russia could never become an EU member was an unnecessarily cold shoulder). He exploited the shock of the hostage tragedy for sending the Europeans a harsh message that he would take no more lectures on Chechnya and now, with his hands untied, he is free to push his pawns into the Georgian corner.

Paradoxical as it may seem, Putin faces more uncertainty on the domestic table, where the balls are rolling more disorderly than he would wish to see. Behind all the

brouhaha around his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, he saw fresh doubts in his leadership and disturbing indicators of the growth of the “protest electorate”. The terrorist attack in Moscow objectively was a heavy blow to his leadership. Putin may indeed need a neat and clean victory, certainly not on the scale of the autumn 1999 invasion of Chechnya, but sufficient to mobilize elites and re-energize public support.

Nobody in Moscow is contemplating a war with Georgia but all sorts of ideas about “regime change” are in the air. Experts argue how to combine military pressure, economic blackmail, and domesticating the opposition to optimize the outcome. Shevardnadze appears to be buried many times over. With all his survival skills, he looked quite shaken after the tête-à-tête with Putin in Chishinau, while the terms of “normalization” dictated by the latter were by no means excessively harsh. While there is no obvious successor either in Tbilisi or in Moscow, Putin’s circle of political “technologists” is perfectly capable of forging one in no time at all.

For many if not most of the “friends of Georgia” (and those come in various colors and sizes), this “managed transition” would not necessarily be such a tragedy, and if Moscow has a hand in it – what’s the big deal? The risks, however, could turn out to be much higher than policy planners are budgeting for. Moscow’s ability to manage charged political processes is questionable in the first place, and the eagerness of too many zealots to contribute to the “success story” could turn it into exactly the opposite. Besides, with so many local actors with survival interests at stake, we might have a chance to observe the phenomenon of multiple tails wagging an utterly disoriented dog.

None of the violent conflicts that tore the Caucasus region apart in the early 1990s has been resolved. Except for Chechnya, Moscow is quite content with the status quo and shows few doubts engaging in virtual hostilities that tend to take unexpected physical forms. It would probably be able to deny responsibility for setting off a new chain reaction of small wars, but there is, unfortunately, no other power able to take responsibility for extinguishing it.

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