



MOSCOW'S DOMESTIC POLICY Lilia Shevtsova, SENIOR ASSOCIATE AT THE CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTRE.
WAS A RECENT SPEAKER AT THE RUSSIA EURASIA PROGRAMME AT CHATHAM HOUSE

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Russian Roulette



Russia's military action in Georgia was driven by Moscow's domestic agenda. Foreign policy has become a tool of collective control back home. While the 'ruling tandem' has gained popularity, the new consensus does not provide for modernisation. Will the predatory state reform or collapse?

tHE WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GEORGIA IN August marked the end of the Perestroika experiment begun by former President Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s. Georgia was a whipping boy in this conflict between post-Communist Russia and the west – primarily the United States – which ended Russia's attempts to build itself a place within western civilisation.

The war had its roots in a whole number of issues: continued fallout from the Soviet collapse; Russia's failure as a peacekeeper – the result of a deliberate Kremlin policy to maintain the Caucasus as a black hole providing Russia with pretexts for intervention; the emergence of corrupt separatist regimes feeding parasitically on loyalty to

Moscow; personal animosity between the leaders in Moscow and Tbilisi; the fight to control energy transit routes; and Tbilisi's inability to give the Abkhazians and South Ossetians broad autonomy within Georgia.

All of these factors could have continued indefinitely, keeping the region in a state of tension. Georgia and Ukraine's desire to join NATO was the catalyst that accelerated events.

The April NATO summit in Bucharest was a turning point after which Moscow was ready to take every possible step to prevent further losses in the post-Soviet area. All that remained was to wait for the pretext, and President Mikheil Saakashvili's attempt to take South Ossetia back into the Georgian fold by force provided just that.

BESIEGED FORTRESS

But foreign policy and geopolitical issues are the consequences of deeper systemic factors. The August war is the direct result of the Russian ruling class returning to a traditional state in which it cannot maintain itself without spheres of influence, macho posturing and the search for an enemy. The state, based on highly centralised and personified power with strong elements of coercion, can exist only as a besieged fortress. It takes such a state for the elite to see NATO membership and the aspirations of Moscow's former 'little brothers' to seek the west's protection as a threat to its existence.



International Events October

OCTOBER 1

Iraqi Government takes over responsibility for citizen patrols from US forces

OCTOBER 8

Hamas meets Egyptian mediators over Palestinian divisions

OCTOBER 8

Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaders continue peace talks

OCTOBER 13

UN Committee on Human Rights meets in Geneva

OCTOBER 15

EU summit discusses relations with Russia

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What happened in the Caucasus was inevitable. Had Saakashvili not been goaded into the trap, the Kremlin would have found some other pretext to show that it will not allow any attempts to undermine what it considers the essential condition of its survival: the status of a strong player able to dictate the rules of the game in its own backyard.

The August developments have proved that for the Kremlin, foreign policy has become the crucial means of carrying out its domestic agenda. In fact, the Kremlin's revisionism and wish to recover lost influence conceals a desire to return to the 1945 Yalta order that is

essential for the preservation of the status quo inside Russia.

With its rhetorical demands for respect, the Kremlin is trying to prove Russia's right to act as an independent power center which is an essential guarantee for the continuation of personified power. What happened in the Caucasus bears the hallmarks of geopolitical confrontation, but in reality it signals a new clash of civilisations, even though the Kremlin is not advancing any fresh messianic idea. Russia's ruling elite is trying to present the country not only as an opponent of the west but as an alternative to it, advancing the right to pursue its own interpretation and imitation of liberal democracy.

Ironically, the west, above all the US, has broadened the Kremlin's field for manoeuvre: slogans of 'regime change', 'humanitarian intervention', 'pre-emptive strikes', 'genocide', and the proclamation of Kosovo's independence are now being used to legitimise Russia's war in the Caucasus and its new trajectory. The Kremlin has become pretty skilful in using the west to strengthen an anti-western model.

RULING IN TANDEM

What are the consequences of the war? It has shown that the question of who runs Russia is not so important: the





Dmitri Medvedev-Vladimir Putin ruling tandem has found a means of collective control while sorting out their differences. More important, they have shown they follow the same course. If anyone hoped that Medvedev would be a more liberal and pro-western politician, he has done everything he can to dash those dreams.

Whether Medvedev deliberately set out to become a 'war president', or whether circumstances forced him into it, does not matter. It has fallen to Medvedev to play a key part in Russian history: he has ended the period ushered in by Gorbachev and has become Gorbachev's antithesis. It will not be easy for him to abandon the role of anti-western war president, even if he wants to.

VICIOUS CYCLE

The war has created national consensus in Russia by uniting the elite and a large part of society against the west. This unity is specifically against the US, given that the Kremlin does not consider Europe worthy of particular attention. Both those who only recently took a pragmatic line and even a significant section of the liberal community have joined the consensus. Official patriotism based on

the ideals of a strong state able to flex its muscles is still a powerful uniting force.

Popularity ratings for the ruling tandem reflect unity. Putin's approval rating has increased from 80 to 83 percent since the war, while Medvedev's has risen similarly from 70 to 73 percent. The number of Russians who believe that Medvedev will continue Putin's course has increased from 82 to 86 percent.

This new consensus based on containing the west is a means for the elite to maintain the status quo; it cannot provide a foundation for Russia's modernisation. On the contrary, a return to a state relying on the merger of power and ownership and the suppression of competition destroys all reforming impulses. Such a state is anti-modernising in its very essence. Globally, post-industrial modernisation has never been achieved through distancing from and even confrontation with the west.

The war has become a means for the Russian tandem to divert attention from growing problems at home and its inability to resolve economic difficulties resulting from the petro-economy. A vicious cycle is to be expected: economic stagnation; a crack-down on the leftovers of pluralism and freedoms; and a search for enemy forces inside and out, to pre-empt social disappointment.

REFORM OR COLLAPSE

The question is, what next? The elite is a rentier class feeding off energy sales to the west. They have no interest in further escalation of the confrontation, as this would threaten their personal inclusion in the west and this is the new element in the old matrix. But, at the same time, they cannot abandon the anti-western means of consolidating Russia.

What is more, the Kremlin seems confident that the west is weak and divided and not ready to take a tough line, afraid to drive Russia into a corner. The absence of a common strategy towards Russia provokes the Kremlin into playing Russian roulette and it may be unable to stop.

Russia has entered a dramatic time and it is not yet clear how the elite will get out of the trap it has driven into. High oil prices and Europe's dependence on Russian energy make the Kremlin confident that it still has the time and opportunity to continue the game for now. But the internal reserves needed to reproduce the matrix are not without limit.

The country is approaching a new moment of truth when the elite discovers that the petro-economy no longer works and maintaining mobilisation at the enemy's expense has become infinitely more difficult. It is unclear whether it will be able to start to reform the predatory state before it collapses and Russia repeats the end of the Soviet Union. 