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WESTERN ENGAGEMENT AND GEORGIA'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

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In the four years since war broke out in August 2008 between Georgia and its erstwhile suzerain Russia, more questions than answers remain. To date, most literature concerning the conflict has focused on assigning blame—a dismal, irresolvable exercise that hinges on establishing the conflict's origins (2008? 2004? 1993? 1991? 1989? 1922?).¹ But far less has been written about what role the West ought to play to bring stability to the region—if not outright reconciliation—and the war's impact on democracy in Georgia.

The much-discussed 2009 Tagliavini report, an independent probe commissioned by the E.U. to determine fault, could be described as either overwhelmingly nuanced or substantively meek for withholding clear answers to the questions it was asked. While the report was successful in mapping a complex situation, its inconclusiveness became a platform to confirm each party's biases. Though the intense debates over who “fired first” may have subsided somewhat, the region itself seems no closer to reconciliation.

Since 2008, many of the channels through which conflict resolution mechanisms would normally operate have been stripped away. Georgia and Russia have yet to restore diplomatic relations; Russia refuses to consider itself a party to the conflict, despite having been the dominant combatant in 2008; the mandate for the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) mission to Georgia was vetoed by Russia; and Euro-Atlantic institutions like NATO and the European Union have effectively pared back their activities in the region with the EU's Eastern Partnership on the backburner and NATO expansion still a non-starter.

Meanwhile, international isolation of the separatist regimes have entrenched Abkhazia and South Ossetia's dependence on Russia, calcifying the very military and political arrangement that an embargo was meant to deter. And hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons, and as many as 300,000 in Georgia alone, remain largely disenfranchised and in a state of legal and functional limbo.

Just as worrisome, regional political development appears to be stuck in a permanent holding pattern. Even Georgia itself, long upheld as a reform success story for a blistering economic growth rate and largely winning its fight against petty corruption, is noticeably stalling in implementing democratic reforms. According to liberty watchdog Freedom House, Georgia's 2012 “hybrid” score of 3.5 registers no improvements over its 2005 scores (which

¹ 2008 is the year of the war; 2004 is the year Rose Revolution leaders came to power; 1993 is the year of the Abkhazia civil war; 1991 is when Georgia became independent and the beginning of the South Ossetia civil war; 1989 marks the deadly suppression of peaceful demonstrations in Tbilisi by Soviet troops and the fall of the Berlin wall; 1921 is the year that the independent Democratic Republic of Georgia was invaded and conquered by the Bolshevik army; and so on.

assess data from 2004, the Rose Revolution government's first year in power), while the Economist Intelligence Unit's assessment actually shows a decline between 2006 and 2011, its most recent report. And Georgia's upcoming parliamentary elections on October 1, which feature the most serious opposition challenge to the ruling party's grip on power since the Rose Revolution, has been plagued by accusations of misuse of administrative resources, unbalanced media coverage, and harassment against the opposition. Transparency International Georgia echoed these concerns in a report on Georgia's pre-election environment between October 2011 and August 2012.²

So far, modern Georgia has never peacefully transferred power through constitutional means. With a lack of major progress in democracy development since the Rose Revolution—and even some regression in areas like media freedom—Georgia seems to have settled into a system where institutions allow measures of pluralism but ultimately within an environment of de facto single party rule. The popularly accepted term for such systems, defined by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, is “competitive authoritarianism.” Lincoln Mitchell, a senior fellow at the Harriman Institute and an expert on Georgian politics, has even concluded that democratization is so far stalled that Georgia's upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections (October 1, 2012 and fall 2013, respectively) will be a better measure of its autocracy as either sultanistic-dynastic or corporatist.³

The same dynamics that permit the region's most vocally pro-West state to preside over an apparently institutionalized semi-authoritarian system have also allowed the hot conflict of August 2008 to re-freeze unresolved and remain a threat to global security. Both problems are symptomatic of an expensive form of neglect: despite granting Georgia disproportionate aid and diplomatic prominence, Western capitals have failed to leverage concomitant progress from Tbilisi in either democracy development or conflict resolution.

For its part, Washington has yet to formulate and articulate a strategic policy towards Georgia and its place in the region, despite Washington's \$1 billion aid package to Georgia following the war (and nearly \$5 billion total from Western allies), in addition to a bevy of other co-occurring aid and development programs. Meanwhile, U.S. rhetoric praising Georgian reforms while issuing gentle reprimands over serious incidents of political malpractice has yet to help redirect the country back to a path of observable democratization.

And though the West has been committed to Georgia's territorial integrity and its policy of reunification, pro forma support for Tbilisi's characterization of the conflict as a primarily a dispute with Russia has done little to ameliorate the yawning gulf between Tbilisi and the separatist regions, not to mention Russia.

MISSING WESTERN LEADERSHIP

So far, the prevailing lesson since August 2008 is that there are no lessons. Russia's decision to use force against its small southern neighbor, founded on a *casus belli* of deplorably exaggerated manufacture, has triggered no apparent long-term consequences. Georgia, once dubbed a “beacon” for its democratic trappings, is today a case study in competitive authoritarianism. The separatist regions, far from choosing reintegration as a result of their international isolation, are drifting ever more closely into Moscow's orbit. If there is a lesson from any of this, it's that an experiment in strategic freewheeling is no strategy at all, and that results demand more substantive Western engagement in the region.

What might a stronger Western policy towards Georgia look like? First, it would establish red lines for Russia as well as Georgia. Russia must know that its foreign adventure circa 2008 will not be tolerated again. Should Moscow again resort to force to resolve issues in the South Caucasus in its favor, there should be strong, lasting, and definable consequences for such actions with international backing.

For Georgia, its decision to issue a unilateral Non-use of Force pledge towards the conflict regions has been rightfully applauded and Georgia should be held to its word. Similarly, Georgia should be held accountable to its promises on political reform. A more concrete set of performance measures, monitoring, and advisory mechanisms should be established to incentivize full and enthusiastic compliance.

Regarding the conflict regions, the current trajectory is untenable. Without recognizing their legal territorial

² For the press release, see: <http://transparency.ge/en/post/report/new-ti-georgia-report-pre-election-environment>.

³ Lincoln Mitchell, "Georgia: The Issue is not Democracy," *Survival* 54 (2012): 97.

jurisdiction—though perhaps recognizing them as speaking for certain organized communities in those territories—the de facto regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be engaged more fully. Currently, the universe of options from Tbilisi have largely been confined to a meager menu: full and total reunification with Tbilisi or the status quo. It stands to reason that other options can and ought to be cultivated. Whether a form of creative reunification—through political condominium or confederation—trading land for peace, or something else, the all or nothing school of conflict resolution deserves shuttering.

An added casualty to the enormous human and material cost of the 2008 war were those pathways for Georgian Euro-Atlantic integration. Despite semi-regular pronouncements of boilerplate encouragement, the August war has done grievous damage to Tbilisi's chances of NATO accession for reasons largely outside of Georgia's control. This should be reversed.

Beyond the obvious security benefits that it would confer upon Georgia, the incentive of NATO membership may be a prize robust enough to energize Georgia's ruling class into making the kind of painful and lasting institutional reforms upon which a democratic culture depends. Allowing Russia's military adventurism—or any other form of diplomatic coercion—to dictate the terms of NATO expansion not only rewards an aggressive foreign policy, but also removes the single best incentive for Georgian democratization. This doesn't mean that Georgian accession into the Atlantic Alliance should be rubber stamped, but that concrete criteria and measurable benchmarks ought to be used to assess Georgia's readiness for membership.

As with Georgia, the Baltic states' NATO bids were vociferously opposed by Moscow and faced skepticism within NATO ranks. However, the speed and quality by which the Baltics consolidated democratic institutions and practices forced the issue in their favor. This is a model that Tbilisi ought to study and emulate.

CARROTS AND STICKS

Yet, given strong internal resistance to Georgian membership in NATO, the West can still do more to incentivize outcomes in the region even outside of NATO pathways. Both the U.S. and the E.U. are in the process of exploring free trade agreements with Georgia and should take a realistic assessment of Georgia's political development into account, matched with definable targets and measures of progress. The U.S., the E.U., and other Western countries are leading donors in Georgia and directly or indirectly contribute to a significant portion of the country's economy through a variety of humanitarian, civil society, and economic development programs. If the West were to take a stronger role in the region, these kind of significant investments are a powerful way to leverage greater participation and ownership from Tbilisi.

In many ways, the August war was a reality check, demonstrating how neither checkbook diplomacy nor diplomatic patronage constitute a sufficient program to deter conflict, much less ensure a process of transition towards genuine democracy. Four years on, with some of the dust settled over some of the more contentious if ultimately less meaningful questions, it is past time for the West more actively to engage and develop a regional strategy to match the resources it invests.

Georgia today faces a potential "new normal" of a permanent and Russia-imposed divorce with its separatist territories, an entrenching semi-authoritarian system, and an uncertain future. The story should not—and does not need to—end this way. Shortly after the 2008 war, Ambassador Adrian Basora, the Director of the Project on Democratic Transitions, and Jean F. Boone cast the conflict as a consequence of policy failures that have also allowed serious democratic regression in certain postcommunist states. In response, they called for renewed Western engagement to reverse democracy's retreat in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia and reinvigorate Western influence in this strategic region.⁴ If Georgia's future is to be a liberal democratic one and integrated with the Euro-Atlantic system, then that goal is even more important now than ever.

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⁴ Basora, Adrian A., and Jean F. Boone. "E-Notes: The Georgia Crisis and Continuing Democratic Erosion in Europe/Eurasia." Foreign Policy Research Institute. http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200810.basoraboone_georgiacrisis.html (accessed September 3, 2012).