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By Stephen Blank

Russia’s war against Georgia of August 2008 marks a watershed in international politics. This war’s visible consequences for Europe, Turkey, Russia, and the United States are well known and have been discussed extensively in the press. But the war’s relationship to Russian domestic politics is not well understood. That understanding involves more than the obvious, though important, point that the war has reconfirmed Vladimir Putin’s primacy above that of his supposed successor as President of Russia, Dmitri Medvedev. After all, every war originates not only in an international context, but also within a domestic context.

Yet few analysts have grasped the significant connection between this war and the apparently unresolved succession struggle in Moscow, nor have they bothered to relate civil-military relations in Russia to larger issues of the nature of the state. (1) Nonetheless, this and previous Russian wars clearly show that those relations are strained, and further, that this tension has the utmost significance for Russian politics. Indeed, these two issues, succession and civil-military relations, are inextricably linked together in this war. If we view this war in the context of the struggle over succession (and the attendant control over resources, power, and policy), then it becomes clear that this succession process represents only the latest confirmation of the fact that the Russian state remains chronically vulnerable to internal coups by politicians using force, or the threat thereof, during succession struggles. Indeed, in every succession struggle since 1991 we have seen the use (or threat of the use) of force, including during the
elections of 1996 and the crisis of 1998, when Boris Yeltsin contemplated force, but was successfully dissuaded from employing it. (2)

The key point here is that this war represents the fourth major military action undertaken by Russian forces since 1991 (Chechnya twice and Kosovo in 1999). In all cases, including Georgia, Russia’s failure to institute genuine democratic reforms of the civil-military relationship has created a situation where an inherent temptation towards military adventurism, regardless of the ensuing costs, is apparent within the state structure. Force has been used to solve both domestic problems and to threaten “enemies” abroad, mainly in order to consolidate the primacy of the ruling elite. Once again, Russian ministers thought that a small victorious war against foreigners could be waged to secure their power at home and abroad at little or no cost, and once again, they miscalculated what would happen.

Moreover, in this war, as in Chechnya, it is clear that military commanders wanted to go further than did the political leadership. Thus, they may have acted on their own to subvert agreements between Russia and the EU, suggesting significant difficulties in restraining them. (3) This difficulty in restraining the military, coupled with its unreformed and viscerally anti-Western threat assessment and the inherent vulnerability of the system, presents an immense potential threat to all of Russia’s interlocutors. Putin in 2007 and Medvedev more recently (specifically in conjunction with the threat of nuclear retaliation against Poland), have indicated that they have accepted the military’s threat assessment of an abiding presupposition of hostility between the West and Russia. It then follows that this constant threat must be countered by force. (4) Moreover, as Pavel Felgengauer has observed, these military agencies and their intelligence organizations are notorious for distorting evidence to come up with fabricated worst-case threat scenarios as they did under Soviet leaders. (5) Therefore, we in the West should understand that we live now under constant threat, because Russian leaders are disposed towards the use of force in response to deliberately manufactured scenarios of constant ideological, information, and political, if not military, aggression emanating (allegedly) from the West. (6)
The domestic result, an explosion of chauvinistic breast-beating about Russia’s return to
great power status under conditions where “nobody loves us” (Nas ne lyubyat) is clearly
part of the ideological rearmament of Russia that Putin has launched since 2004 (if not
earlier), in order to end once and for all the idea of reform. Thus, Vladimir Shlapentokh
has shown that an essential component of the Kremlin’s ideological campaign to
maintain the Putin regime in power and extend it (albeit under new leadership) past the
elections of 2008 is anti-Americanism. As he wrote,

"The core of the Kremlin’s ideological strategy is to convince the public that any
revolution in Russia will be sponsored by the United States. Putin is presented as a
bulwark of Russian patriotism, as the single leader able to confront America’s
intervention in Russian domestic life and protect what is left of the imperial heritage.
This propaganda is addressed mostly to the elites (particularly elites in the military and
FSB) who sizzle with hatred and envy of America." (7)

Similarly, the Russian philosopher Sergei Gavrov writes,

"The threats are utopian, the probability of their implementation is negligible, but their
emergence is a sign. This sign – a message to 'the city and the world' – surely lends
itself to decoding and interpretation: we will defend from Western claims our ancient
right to use our imperial (authoritarian and totalitarian) domestic socio-cultural traditions
within which power does not exist to serve people but people exist to serve power." (8)

The war against Georgia was both a culmination of previous efforts and the first step in
a new campaign of this ideological rearmament of Russia as an autarchic, autocratic,
“sovereign” power that answers to nobody either at home or abroad and is surrounded
by enemies.

**PUTIN’S PRIMACY AND THE EVISCERATION OF REFORM**

Apart from the enshrinement of a condition of permanent threat and the predisposition
to adventurism, the other domestic context of this invasion is the extension of Putin’s
primacy. Even if we concede that the war’s motives and origins lie largely in the realm of geopolitical considerations, it is clear that it has served to extend Putin’s leadership. Indeed, he was even seen on Russian TV giving Medvedev directions at one point during the war. We do not need to argue that the crisis and war were fomented to achieve this aim, but they certainly played a role in stopping nascent policies of Medvedev’s that appeared to run counter to those of Putin and his entourage, particularly his gray eminence, Igor Sechin. Thus, this war can be seen as only the latest example of the linkage between succession crises and the use of force.

Although Russia sidestepped a visible crisis before its presidential elections in early 2008, in fact a bruising and even violent struggle among elites was occurring with arrests, public fighting among elites in the media, and corresponding efforts to create and use new investigative organs to create the potential for an ongoing purge. (9) As part of that struggle we see continuing rivalry between the older Procurator’s office and a new Investigations Committee (Sledstvennyi Komitet-SK) led by Putin’s law school classmate, Aleksandr Bastrykin, as well as continuing struggles over policy and control of resources. As of 2007-08, analysis showed that,

"It is now fundamentally important for the Kremlin groupings to preserve their political assets, and they can only be augmented at the expense of rivals in the shadow 'vertical axis of power.' One of the most viable methods for legitimating less than perfectly clean assets and illicit power is the legalization of the political status of the players – their presence in the Duma, the Federation Council, the government, and the future President’s staff. Correspondingly, virtually the most effective way of fighting your rivals is to prevent them getting into legal politics. Here control of the Investigations Committee, which will begin work on 1 September 2007 — will be very handy. Even now membership of United Russia or Just Russia, or even the post of senator, governor, or mayor, is not a safeguard against criminal prosecution. Given the intensification of the struggle among pro-regime groupings at a time when supreme power in the country is changing hands, it is perfectly logical from the viewpoint of the interests of the current business elites to give the Prosecutor’s office a political oversight role. On the one
hand, this will make it possible to prevent, for example, a joint opposition candidate from participating in the presidential election, if such a candidate should eventually emerge. On the other, it will provide an opportunity to prevent rivals from other groupings from strengthening their position at the expense of the regions." (10)

This monster known as the SK can be used to purge enemies from their positions to clear space for members of a victorious grouping, just as occurred in 1937, if not even earlier, under Ivan the Terrible’s *Oprichnina*. As this commentary observed,

"Of course, the economic articles of the Criminal Code are not going to disappear from the political struggle. And the process of redistributing assets or raw material resources among the 'victors' will continue nevertheless. But the political articles both provide an opportunity to combat the non-establishment opposition (those who are not part of the Kremlin political pool) and also allow some sections of the system to fight others. Economic raids on behalf of the state with the assistance of, again, the Prosecutor’s Office have become one of the key elements of the Putin era. It appears that we are now entering an era of political raiding when the owners of dubious assets and people with a weak position in the regime will be emerging from the shadows using legal political institutions and not allowing their rivals to do the same. So the Investigations Committee will still play a role in Russia’s political history irrespective of which specific Kremlin groupings are behind its creation and what thrust they impart to this body’s work." (11)

Not surprisingly, once Medvedev and Gazprom triumphed over the *siloviki* faction, evidently led by Igor Sechin (who heads Rosneft), Gazprom moved to take over Rosneft’s prize subsidiary, Tomskneft. (12) Soon afterwards it became clear that, as Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Vladislav Surkov warned, “destructive forces [are] attempting to drive a wedge” between Putin and Medvedev. (13) Neither is it surprising that upon becoming president, Medvedev launched an anticorruption campaign. While that campaign is unlikely to eliminate the corruption scourge from Russia, which still has not instituted the rule of law, nor held state officials accountable
to democratic processes, it almost certainly becomes a weapon for the replacement of officials deemed to be corrupt or those who could be so accused. And since Medvedev announced what everyone already knew, namely that official positions are bought and sold, an anticorruption campaign strikes at many who built their careers in the Putin administration. (14)

Naturally, Putin’s people have reason to be alarmed and see this as a threat to their position and power. Consequently, Sechin (clearly supported by Putin) has led an attack on what Medvedev, who has extensive ties to Gazprom, calls “our Gazprom.” (15) Similarly, Putin’s attack on the Mechel’ corporation, which led to a major perturbation in the Russian stock market, was then denounced by Medvedev, who cautioned officials against “giving nightmares” to business. While Putin clearly was calling for more state regulation of, and involvement in, the economy, Medvedev talked of lessening such intervention, but appears to be losing on that pledge, as the state now is likely to become even more involved in the economy. (16)

Putin, even before the Georgian campaign, also seemed to be trying to conduct his own security and foreign policy by planting hints among military men, who naturally support him, that Russia should restore its relations with Cuba and establish an air base there. He even sent Sechin and Security Council Chairman Nikolai Patrushev to Cuba to discuss the resumption of cooperation between the two states. Given Patrushev’s position, this could only mean defense cooperation. Such moves are clearly a gratuitous attempt to threaten the United States. In any event, Cuban officials refused to cooperate – likely because these plans were announced publicly without first consulting them, providing further evidence that this move served interests other than that of Russian state policy. (17)

We cannot argue that Putin caused this war merely to retain his power and that of the siloviki. The well-known geopolitical considerations that emerged before, during, and after combat operations cannot simply be called an appendage to the war. However, it is clear that this crisis and war were planned well in advance and that the provocation of
Georgia probably was staged in such a way as to compel Medvedev, the sole person capable of legally authorizing force, to go beyond his initial support for peace enforcement cooperation confined solely to South Ossetia and to invade Georgia in order to remove South Ossetia and Abkhazia entirely from Tbilisi’s control. (18) Once the war broke out, it was clear that Putin took the leadership position, until it became too obvious that he was usurping power. But, few believe he has relinquished or lost power since the outbreak of hostilities. In other words, domestic considerations of primacy and place were not likely to be far from the calculations of Putin and his entourage.

The foregoing analysis strongly suggests the need for further investigation not only of civil-military relations as an essential instrument of state building, but also of the link between succession crises and war in Russia. The war with Georgia again has demonstrated to us just how critical these factors are for understanding Russian politics. But this war also tells us, in no uncertain terms, that the pathologies of this state, allied to a belief in its being under constant threat, coupled with its sense of being ascendant as the West declines, point in the direction of a long-term threat to Eurasian stability that it cannot control by itself. Russia also will obviously resist any other government’s efforts to control it, but a state with an inherent predisposition to aggressive military action and an inherently illegitimate and unstable domestic political structure can only be seen as a risk factor, not as a true partner for any of its neighbors. If the situation in Georgia teaches us anything, it is that a Russia, which has chosen self-isolation and autarchy at home and in the international arena represents a standing threat to all of its partners and neighbors. Worse yet, in its present incarnation and given the tepid response of the West to the current crisis, not only is Russia a permanent risk factor, it is out of control and thinks it has a license for further adventures.

**Source Notes:**


(11) *Ibid*.


(14) Anton Orekh, “Famine,” Moscow, *Yezhenedevnyi zhurnal Internet Version*, in Russian, 29 Jul 08, FBIS SOV, 29 Jul 08 via WNC.

(16) David Schlesinger and Janet McBride, “‘Russia To Cut State Role in Economy,’ Medvedev,” Reuters, 25 Jun 08; Igor Naumov, “More FGUPs, Good and Various,” Moscow, Nezavisimaya gazeta, in Russian, 28 Jul 08, FBIS SOV, 28 Jul 08 via WNC. 

(17) Moscow, Kommersant.com, in English, 4 Aug 08, “Igor Sechin Tested a New Approach to Cuba,” FBIS SOV, 4 Aug 08 via WNC; Moscow, Interfax, in Russian, 4 Aug 08, FBIS SOV, 4 Aug 08 via WNC; Yevgeny Trifonov, “Friendship Out of Spite,” Moscow, Gazeta.ru, in English, FBIS SOV, 7 Aug 08 via WNC; Roman Dobrokhotov, “No Ships To Call In Havana: Cuba Refuses Russian Military Aid,” Moscow, Novye izvestiya, in Russian, 8 Aug 08, FBIS SOV via WNC; Open Source Committee, OSC Analysis, “Sechin Trip to Cuba, Putin Statements Boost Rumors of Russian Base,” 13 Aug 08, FBIS SOV, 13 Aug 08 via WNC. 


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