



## Russian power and the South Ossetian conflict

by Flemming Splidsboel, Research Director, PhD,  
Royal Danish Defence College, forsk-01@fak.dk

Brief



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Royal Danish Defence College, forsk-01@fak.dk

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Royal Danish Defence College  
Ryvangs Allé 1  
DK-2100 Copenhagen  
Denmark  
Tlf.: 3915 1515  
Fax: 3929 6172  
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## Russian power and the South Ossetian conflict

When on 26 August 2008 Russian president Dmitriy Medvedev made the surprise announcement that Russia was recognising the sovereignty of Georgian breakaway region South Ossetia (as well as Abkhazia), he was using the ultimate political tool of the modern state: The right to give or to deny the recognition of the sovereignty of other states.<sup>1</sup> This is a step which the state usually will take hesitantly and after great deliberation only as often it can only be undone with considerable costs for the state itself. In this case, the controversy of the Russian decision is clearly indicated by the fact that even early into 2009, only one other state – Nicaragua – had recognised the sovereignty of South Ossetia. Even more controversially, the road leading to this point had to a large extent been cleared by the Russian military, either through direct involvement in the fighting or through indirect support, e.g., arms transfers, training and intelligence, to the South Ossetian rebels. And the short but dramatic war between Georgia and Russia which was fought out in South Ossetia in August 2008 really was just the culmination of a Russian military involvement which dates back to the days of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The political and military power, however, are only the most recent and controversial manifestations of the large array of tools which Russia has been able to employ as it has tried to influence the situation in South Ossetia. In fact, so I argue here, as all other states, Russia enjoys four types of power – military, civilian, normative and soft - and it has used all four in the conflict over South Ossetia. It has done so in different combinations, with varying intensity and with more or less successful outcomes.

This study proceeds in four main parts. In the first part, I briefly discuss the Russian interests in South Ossetia, which I argue have mainly been linked to the question of Georgia's foreign policy orientation. Following this, I introduce the four different types of power, and I go on, in the third part, to apply these categories to the South Ossetian conflict. As part of this, I attempt a rough categorisation of the conflict according to the different Russian modus operandi. This part of the study does not in any way claim to be exhaustive; the aim, essentially much more modest, instead is to provide an alternative framework for the study of this type of conflict. And finally, I offer a few concluding thoughts about the conflict and about the future status of South Ossetia.

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(1) This paper has also been published as "Russia and South Ossetia: The Road to Sovereignty", in Walter Feichtinger, ed., *Used/Missed Opportunities for Conflict Prevention – The Case of Georgia's Territorial Conflicts* (Vienna: Austrian National Defence Academy 2009). The permission to reprint is gratefully acknowledged.

*Statement by President of Russia Dmitriy Medvedev* (26 August 2008); in <www.mid.ru>; accessed 14 February 2009.

## Russian interests in South Ossetia

Power is a relative term. The concept only acquires meaning through comparisons, for instance of capabilities or process outcomes. Karl Deutsch, for instance, advised us to get an indication of the amount of power available to an actor by looking at "the difference between the amounts of changes imposed and changes accepted by the actor".<sup>2</sup> This is of course a measurement of power based on process outcomes and it is one which is useful in this particular context also. Clearly, events in August 2008 reflected Russian interests much more than those of Georgia, and the development indicated that, relative to earlier stages of the conflict, Russian power had increased while Georgian power had decreased; Russia, after all, took a series of bold military and political steps, suggesting that it enjoys a new-found confidence in its own ability to change the system – be it globally, regionally or locally – in a way that reflects its interests more accurately than is the case today.

However, it is equally clear that global events in the early 1990s illustrated a dramatic loss of Russian power. Put simply, the international system was being arranged in a way that caused increasing discontent and resentment in Russia. This development started already in 1992 and subsequently it just accelerated.<sup>3</sup> The reasons were many and are not easily pinned down. While it is tempting to see the development as a more or less inevitable consequence of the fact that Russia gradually seemed stronger and more emboldened and therefore in a position to challenge the West still more, sociological approaches instead offer richer and more nuanced analyses. And when these writers look at the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, they mainly see a record of expectations that were never met.

Russia on its side was sincerely (but perhaps also naively) hoping and expecting to be recognised as part of the "in-group", but that recognition was not (and could not) be delivered; the West on its side was hoping and expecting that Russia would follow new normative standards, but it did not fully deliver and so it remained part of "them". Once distrust started growing, it fed on itself, eventually leading to the now wide-spread talk of a new Cold War even.

For Russia, the early signs that the West had not managed to get rid of its Cold War mentality and therefore could not be fully trusted included the failure to offer a comprehensive recovery programme (a new Marshall Plan) to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union; the planning and subsequent execution of two rounds of enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] as well

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(2) Karl Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control* (New York, NY: Free Press 1966), p. 115.

(3) E.g. *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (5 March 1992) and Eric Shiraev and Vladislav Zubok, *Anti-Americanism in Russia: From Stalin to Putin* (London: Palgrave 2001), p. 47.

as increased support for Russian-critical voices and regimes in the territory of the former Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup>

As relations with the West in general and with the United States of America [USA] in particular started deteriorating, the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS] was soon seen in Russia as a possible source of support or, if that failed, a sphere-of-influence to be manipulated; it was, in fact, the near-only pool of support which Russia could hope to draw from as the country found it agonisingly difficult to find allies in its struggle to arrest or to even roll back Western influence. Few states were so vulnerable to Moscow's politics of arm-twisting that they felt that they *had* to follow the lead of the new-born Russian state, which seemed to teeter on the brink of total collapse and disintegration, and even fewer were inclined to do so out of free will.

When faced with such adverse developments in the international system, so traditional balancing theory tells us, a state will have two principal policies at its disposal. The first is to generate more resources, either through intrinsic means or by teaming up with allies and the second is to weaken the opposing side.<sup>5</sup>

While some of the CIS members have served as more (e.g. Belarus) or less (e.g. Kyrgyzstan) willing allies, others were drawn into the organisation by Russia mainly to prevent them from throwing in their lot with the opposing side. The overall purpose, so it should be kept in mind, was to further Russian demands that certain processes in the international system be halted.

Initially, Georgia managed to withstand Russian pressure on it to join the CIS. However, after prolonged and intense pressure, not least including support from Moscow for the South Ossetian cause, then Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze in late 1993 brought his country into the CIS; in a statement, Shevardnadze explained that he had been "forced to consent to Georgia's joining the CIS as a result of the country's having been 'brought to its knees'", and he added that he personally had opposed Georgian membership in the CIS "until the very end".<sup>6</sup> Moscow's policy of arm-twisting had worked.

Needless to say, this development laid the basis for a very unhealthy relationship between Russia and Georgia. And, additionally, it served to weaken the already fragile CIS which was being kept together by a combination of bribes (e.g. cheap credits, subsidised goods and unrestricted market access) and threats (e.g. support for secessionist movements). In a comment, a Russian newspaper drew the conclusion that "today the members of the Commonwealth scarcely have any other choice than to accept economic integration with Russian while making political concessions they don't like".<sup>7</sup>

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(4) See, e.g., the speech by then Russian president Vladimir Putin in Munich on 2 October 2007; in <[www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?sprache=en&id=179](http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?sprache=en&id=179)>; accessed 5 January 2009.

(5) Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: McGraw-Hill 1979).

(6) In *Segodnya* (9 October 1993), in *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* [CDPSP] 45/41 (1993), p. 28.

(7) *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (8 December 1993), in CDPSP 45/49 (1993), p. 15.

And in a later analysis, two Russian scholars warned against believing that this would work, explaining that “most likely, the leaders of the CIS member countries are artificially prolonging the days of the outer shell known as the ‘Commonwealth’ until the organic process of their adaptation to a world economic picture that is new to them is complete and problems that still require a cautious attitude toward Russia ... are removed”.<sup>8</sup>

But for a Russian leadership determined to bring the post-Soviet space together (excluding Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania which had all been irrevocably “lost”) and to oppose the West, the policy, however short-sighted and counter-productive others may have labelled it, indeed seemed to work. Thus, Georgia *did* join the CIS and, no matter how foot-dragging it was as a member state, as long as it was there, at least it was not joining any Western-led security structure.

Georgia stayed in the CIS until August 2008, when the country announced the immediate termination of its obligations as a member state.<sup>9</sup> As this preceded the Russian recognition of the sovereignty of South Ossetia, the main cause of the Georgian withdrawal from the CIS was the fighting with Russia. However, there is no doubt that the secession of South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) – facilitated and made possible by Russia – has only reinforced the view of those who believe that all in all it serves Georgia’s interests better to view the CIS from the outside; the recognition by a supposedly allied state of a breakaway region is, after all, extremely controversial.

The picture presented here is one in which South Ossetia has primarily been played by Russia as a pawn in a game of chess against Georgia. And the prize for Russia to win was a subservient Georgian state which would bandwagon with Russia out of fear of the possible consequences of not doing so;<sup>10</sup> Georgian involvement in the openly anti-Russian GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) and the Community of Democratic Choice has only shown that the country could not be fully controlled; however strong Russia’s desire to keep Georgia in the CIS, in its policy responses it was still restricted by a concern for its relations with the other member states as well as by normative considerations which would rule out “unacceptable” behaviour.

The Russian-South Ossetian relationship clearly contains more than that, however. Below, I will offer a few examples of the pro-Ossetian and anti-Georgian discourse which dominated a large part of the Russian media from the early stages of the conflict; while there is no doubt that the South Ossetians enjoyed widespread support in Russia even at this time, nearly two decades of “Common Othering” of Georgia has of course had an impact on the Russian public view on South Ossetia and on the Georgian role in the conflict. A quick succession of

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(8) Konstantin Zatulin and Andranik Migranyan in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (1 December 1997), in CDPSP 49/50 (1998), pp. 1-2.

(9) According to *Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia on Georgia’s Withdrawal from CIS* (18 August 2008); in <[www.mfa.gov.ge](http://www.mfa.gov.ge)>, accessed 5 January 2009.

(10) Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell, NY: CUP 1987), chapter 2.

August and September 2008 polls illustrated the understanding and sympathy which the Russian population has for the South Ossetians. Thus, while 54 per cent held the Georgian government responsible for the outbreak of the August 2008 hostilities, very few (only 1 per cent each) assigned blame to the governments of either South Ossetia or Russia; 12 per cent pointed fingers at all three governments (10-13 August);<sup>11</sup> 90 per cent of all respondents found that Russia should help South Ossetia leave Georgia (10-13 August);<sup>12</sup> 72 per cent wanted the Russian peacekeepers to stay in South Ossetia (10-13 August);<sup>13</sup> 87 per cent found that Russia should protect its citizens regardless of their place of living and 91 per cent believed that the development in the Caucasus threatened Russian interests (10-13 August);<sup>14</sup> 71 per cent wanted Russia to recognise the sovereignty of South Ossetia and 63 per cent were even willing to welcome the region into Russia should it wish so (16-17 August 2008);<sup>15</sup> and a later poll showed that 87 per cent agreed with the 17 September 2008 signing by Medvedev of treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with South Ossetia (and Abkhazia), in which Russia pledges military protection, while another 79 per cent found that Russia should offer financial support to assist in the development of the area (20-21 September 2008).<sup>16</sup> The early August 2008 action by Georgian forces against South Ossetia, described by *Jane's* as a "full-scale military assault", clearly was the precipitating event of the war which then almost immediately broke out between Georgia and Russia.<sup>17</sup> Looking slightly further back, however, two other events seem of critical importance. The eventual outcome – the recognition by Russia of the sovereignty of South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) – was not in any way inevitable because of these two events, but together they propelled the area toward secession backed by unprecedented Russian support. The first event was the 2003 Georgian Rose Revolution which brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power at the expense of then president Eduard Shevardnadze. Critically, Saakashvili soon announced not only a policy that aimed at the speediest possible re-integration of South Ossetia into Georgia proper, he also made clear that he wanted to bring Georgia even closer to the West, in particular the

(11) WCIOM, *Tragediya v Yuzhnoi Ossetia: Kto vinovat?*, article 1021 (14 August 2008); in <www.wciom.ru>, accessed 24 February 2009. Remarkably, a full 22 per cent were of the opinion that the United States [US] government was responsible for the fighting

(12) WCIOM, *Buduschiy status Yuzhnoi Ossetii: Mnenie rossiyan*, article 1022 (15 August 2008); in www.wciom.ru, accessed 24 February 2009.

(13) WCIOM, *Rossiyskie mirotvortsy dolzhny ostatsya v Yuzhnoi Ossetii!*, article 1023 (15 August 2008); in www.wciom.ru, accessed 24 February 2009.

(14) WCIOM, *Zaschita prav rossiyan – v svoei strane i v Yuzhnoi Ossetii*, article 1025 (19 August 2008); in <www.wciom.ru>, accessed 24 February 2009.

(15) WCIOM, *Rossiyanе podderzhivayut vybor Yuzhnoi Ossetii i Abkhazii v polzy nezavisimosti*, article 1030 (27 August 2008); in <www.wciom.ru>, accessed 24 February 2009.

(16) WCIOM, *Rossiyskaya pomoshch Yuzhnoi Ossetii i Abkhazii: Nuzhna, no kak crezvycajnaya, a ne postoyannaya mera*, article 1055 (25 September 2008); in <www.wciom.ru>, accessed 24 February 2009.

(17) *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS: South Ossetia* (8 September 2008).

USA, and that the country was hoping to join NATO within no more than four years, that is, by 2008.<sup>18</sup>

It follows from the previous argument that for the Russian side the latter aim held the more damaging prospects. A Georgian exit from the CIS and then entry into NATO would be hugely problematic for Russia's understanding of its own role and mission in the CIS space as well as for its security interests as these have been defined by successive Russian administrations. Both plans – re-integration with South Ossetia and NATO membership – therefore had to be thwarted; but for Moscow the immediate aim was to prevent the re-integration of South Ossetia into Georgia proper in order to prevent the ultimate aim, that is, the formal re-orientation of Georgia away from Russia and the CIS toward the West.

The second event was the February 2008 recognition by a large number of especially Western states of the sovereignty of Kosovo. Russia famously has opposed the independence of Kosovo, citing “precedence concerns” and warning that, if Kosovo were to be recognised as a sovereign state, Russia could be forced to recognise other and similar non-state entities such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Trans-Dniester. As a consequence of the recognition of Kosovo in early 2008, in April 2008 Moscow authorised “official relations” to be established with South Ossetia to indicate that the area now had a status of semi-statehood.<sup>19</sup> Others have argued that Russia actually wanted to secure the secession of South Ossetia from Georgia; what seemed to be a Russian “threat” to recognise the region should Kosovo be recognised, instead is presented as a “deal” whereby Russia would fail to oppose the sovereignty of Kosovo if only the West would support South Ossetia. In the words of the Stockholm Peace Research Institute,

“It was long expected that Russia would be ready to strike a deal with the USA and others over Kosovo in the hope that the West would then accept the secession of the (Russian-backed) provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia and Trans-Dniester from Moldova. During 2006, however, it became clear that Western powers were not ready to accept this implied trade-off and would continue to support the territorial integrity of Georgia and Moldova. This drove Russia back towards its more traditional policy of sympathy and cooperation with Serbia ... However, when [international mediator Martti] Ahtisaari put forward his proposal [about phased sovereignty for Kosovo] in ... 2007, Russia started to change its tone and no longer mentioned an eventual veto on the independence of Kosovo – a hint perhaps of renewed consideration being given to a *quid pro quo*”.<sup>20</sup>

(18) *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty [RFE/RL] – Caucasus Report* (2 July 2004); in <www.rferl.org>.

(19) *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS: South Ossetia* (8 September 2008).

(20) *SIPRI Yearbook 2007* (Oxford: OUP 2007), p. 47

Both interpretations of course are quite cynical; the main difference between them is that while the former bases itself on a belief in a Russian principle of non-recognition of secessionist entities (unless compelling circumstances dictate otherwise), the latter bases itself on a belief that Russia was willing to recognise at least the four areas mentioned above. In the absence of the right sources, there is no way for us to ascertain what really happened behind closed doors in the Kremlin.

It does seem, however, that the policy of blanket recognition goes against Russia's earlier policies and those of different organisations of which the country is a member. The Shanghai Co-operation Organisation [SCO], for instance, since 1999 has a clause in its charter which defines secessionism as "an evil";<sup>21</sup> and at the SCO summit in Dushanbe in August 2008, the other member states, led by China, gave Medvedev a minor public humiliation by insisting that they would not break the SCO principle by recognising the sovereignty of South Ossetia (and Abkhazia).<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, a policy that weakens the principle of territorial integrity is fraught with risks for a Russian state that may have been successful at increasing internal cohesion in the past decade but which will undoubtedly have to face strong secessionist movements again, perhaps already within the next decade (e.g. Chechnya, Dagestan or perhaps even Kaliningrad).

Instead it could be speculated that by linking the status of Kosovo to the status of other entities such as South Ossetia, Russia gambled and eventually painted itself into a corner from which there was no easy exit. The early 2008 recognition of Kosovo did not automatically cause the recognition by Russia of South Ossetia – although the April 2008 establishment of "official relations" seems to have been ordered by the Kremlin in direct response to the Kosovo development. This decision also brought Russia one step closer to the recognition of the sovereignty of South Ossetia; while it is doubtful that this is where Russia *really* wanted to go, it may have felt that it had to punish not only Georgia for launching a military attack on South Ossetia with the aim of winning control of the area but also the West for having disregarded Russia's objections to the recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign state.

Given the all too obvious lack of international support for Russia's recognition of South Ossetia, even among its closest allies, as well as the precedent which this step may set for some of Russia's own federal entities, it seems reasonable to speculate that there has been a good deal of soul-searching in the Kremlin. The administration may still try to convince itself that Georgia has been left even weaker than it was before August 2008 and that the region, fully unable to exist without Russian support, offers new and promising prospects for Russian involvement in the Caucasus; plans to establish before the end of 2009 a military

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(21) E.g. Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "The Shanghai Co-operation Organisation", *Asian Affairs* 39/2 (2008).

(22) "SCO Fails to Back Russia Over Georgia", *RFE/RL* (28 August 2008); in <[www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)>.

base in South Ossetia with a deployment of 3,700 troops are a sign that Russia is indeed profiting from the conflict.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, however, it seems that Russia has been weakened. Its policy on South Ossetia has been exposed as a failure by the international community, it has exacerbated tension with the West, the CIS has lost a member state, and Georgia has been forced to go the whole way in terms of its pro-Western orientation; bandwagoning is even less an option today than it was before August 2008. And in even in a long-term perspective, Russia will find it extremely hard to satisfy Tbilisi's demands that the region be brought back under Georgian control; by agreeing to this, Russia will suffer heavy reputational damage.

## The different types of power

As suggested, all states enjoy the following four types of power. Variations across states therefore are not caused by class but by quantity; Russia is more powerful than Georgia which again is more powerful than South Ossetia, but all three have access to the same types of power.

Firstly, military power, defined as "the ability to use physical force".<sup>24</sup> This is perhaps the type of power that is most easily understood, as history unfortunately is replete with examples of its use by actors seeking to "kill, maim, coerce, and destroy".<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, civilian power, which includes most importantly economic and political power. This category serves as a residual as it is to some extent defined by what the other categories are *not*.

Thirdly, normative power, defined as "the ability to define acceptable standards of behaviour".<sup>26</sup> Recent decades have witnessed the attempt, especially among non-Western states, to build up normative power, and it is a type of power which seems to be growing in importance. Part of the reason for this is the gradual emergence of a global constituency informed by the mass media and by new information technology about events throughout the world. While it was never fully true that "might is right", it is even less true today; to illustrate, when in July 2008 United States [US] president Barack Obama visited Berlin as part of

(23) *RIA Novosti* (25 February 2009); in <en.rian.ru/russia/20090129/119877010.html>, accessed 25 February 2009. In addition to this, Russia plans to establish a base of a similar size as well as both air and naval facilities in Abkhazia.

(24) John Garnett explains that military power "is the legally sanctioned instrument of violence that governments use in their relations with each other, and, when necessary, in an internal security role"; in "The role of military power", in Richard Little and Michael Smith, eds., *Perspectives on World Politics* (London: Routledge 1991), p. 69. This definition, however, misses non-state entities such as South Ossetia whose military build-up is controversial simply by the fact that it is *not* sanctioned by the central government (of Georgia).

(25) *Ibid.*, p. 69.

(26) Ian Manners defines normative power as "the ability to shape conceptions of 'normal'"; in "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", *Journal of Common Market Research* 40/2 (2002), p. 239.

his pre-election tour of key capitals, he introduced himself as a “fellow citizen of the world”, addressing his audience with the opening words “people of the world”.<sup>27</sup> Most states today find that controversial policies have to be legitimated not only at home but often even more so abroad.

These first three types of power share two characteristics which deserve mentioning here. One is the ability of the actor to use them either positively, for instance by offering military assistance, financial help or normative support, or negatively, for instance by threatening to launch military strikes, introduce economic sanctions or work to delegitimise a given behaviour. And the other characteristic is the fact that all three types of power can lead to policy changes based on simple as well as complex learning; while simple learning refers to a process where policies change but fundamental values remain the same, complex learning instead requires a change in fundamental values which is then followed by a change in behaviour.<sup>28</sup>

The fourth and final type of power is soft power, which Joseph Nye, who coined the term, defines as “the ability to shape the preferences of others”.<sup>29</sup> One way to approach it is to view it as the combined total of the other types of power. Soft power differs from these other categories in that it is the only “power muscle” which cannot be flexed (neither positively nor negatively) and by the fact that it is associated with complex learning only; actors use their soft power by drawing attention to their fundamental values and the norms by which they operate – that is, their “way of life” – thereby hoping to persuade others to follow their lead.

## Russian power

As noted, Deutsch focused on process outcomes. In what follows below, however, I will take one step back to look at the capabilities which made the present situation surrounding South Ossetia possible. I will discuss the different types of power in reverse order, starting with soft power, that is, the most diffuse type of power, and ending with the military power which has played such a central role in the conflict.

### Soft power

I am not aware of any study which has tried to measure Russia’s soft power. Studies do exist, however, on “soft power”, but usually this is merely part of the very traditional hard (military or kinetic) and soft (non-military or non-kinetic) dichotomy, where the latter category includes civilian, normative and soft power as the concepts are used here.

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(27) “Obama trip addressed global constituency”, *The Boston Globe* (27 July 2008).

(28) Joseph Nye, “Nuclear Learning and U.S.-Soviet Security Regimes”, *International Organization* 41/3 (1987), p. 380.

(29) Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, NY: Public Affairs 2004).

Russia clearly is not a great soft power. Since 2000, the Russian foreign policy doctrines have stressed the need to create a more positive image of Russia in the world, thereby openly admitting that there is a problem here. Part of this task is to "promote an *objective* image of Russia globally as a democratic state committed to a socially oriented market economy..."<sup>30</sup> Even polls conducted among Russians show that more people have feelings of shame rather than pride towards their country;<sup>31</sup> given this, it seems reasonable to hypothesise that foreigners may be even less attracted to the Russian "way of life".

But Russia probably has more soft power than it is usually credited with. This is especially so among people of the former Soviet Union; to illustrate, a 2006 poll showed that 32 per cent of Belarusians, 23 per cent of Kazakhs, 21 per cent of Russians and 34 per cent of Ukrainians preferred to live in a (Russian-led) union of these four states rather than in their present state.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, the aim of South Ossetia, as expressed for instance in the January 1992 referendum, has not been sovereignty; rather, the region has aimed at incorporation into Russia, as either a separate entity or through unification with North Ossetia.<sup>33</sup> Part of the reason for this undoubtedly is the fact that very few observers have deemed it realistic that South Ossetia could exist entirely on its own; interestingly, even after Russia had recognised the sovereignty of South Ossetia, president Eduard Kokoity has explained that he still aims to bring the new state into Russia".<sup>34</sup>

But Russia in itself has also been attractive – and for several reasons. Firstly, it should be re-called that the conflict in South Ossetia was prompted by a succession of controversial laws passed by the Georgian Supreme Soviet which had the effect of undermining the rights of minorities within Georgia, including the South Ossetians: The restrictive August 1990 language law, which introduced Georgian language testing, the October 1990 election law, which excluded regional parties from the parliamentary elections held the same month, and then, finally, the decision in December 1990 to suspend the autonomy of South Ossetia.<sup>35</sup>

Secondly, Russia at the same time seemed comparably tolerant of ethnic minorities; most clearly, just across the border, North Ossetia enjoyed the status of an autonomous republic, that is, one step above the level which had now been denied the South Ossetians. A Russian newspaper, though hardly an impartial

(30) *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (18 July 2008), I; emphasis added.

(31) E.g. FOM, *Patriotizm: kriterii i proyavleniya* (7 December 2006); in <www.fom.ru>, accessed 22 February 2009.

(32) WCIOM, *Raspad SSSR i novye integratsionnye nastroyeniya*, Article 593 (7 December 2006); in <www.wciom.ru>, accessed 25 February 2009.

(33) E.g. *Keesing's Record of World Events* [KRWE] (1992), p. 38731. It should be added that before this, the region wanted to leave Georgia and to join the Soviet Union as "the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic"; in *Postfactum* (2 January 1991), in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* [CDSP] 43/1 (1991), p. 9.

(34) *RFE/RL – News* (11 September 2008).

(35) Peter Dahl Truelsen and Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "Konflikten i Sydossetien", *Royal Danish Defence College Brief* (2008), pp. 5-6.

observer of the unfolding crisis, in mid-1992 tried to explain to its readers the appeal of Russia to the South Ossetians:

“In the north, the Ossetian urban intelligentsia found its identity within the Russian-speaking environment of [the capital city] Vladikavkaz. Linguistic Russification was accompanied by an increase in Ossetian influence in the republic. The Russified Ossetians preserved a firm ethnic self-awareness and the potential for de-assimilation. In Georgia the assimilation of the Ossetians took a different course: ...the point of political and territorial autonomy for South Ossetia was to overcome the “second-class citizen” syndrome of the Ossetians in Georgia. The destruction of South Ossetia’s political autonomy in today’s Georgia is a declaration to the Ossetians that they are social outcasts without a state and with a ‘guest’ complex”.<sup>36</sup>

Subsequent Georgian administrations failed to increase the attraction of their own country to the South Ossetians, thereby leaving Russian soft power intact;<sup>37</sup> a non-ethnic understanding of what it means to be “Georgian” was not developed and propagated and the original dividing lines of “us” and “them” therefore remained strong.

Thirdly, and most generally, the Russian “way of life” has had an attractive appeal to it. In 2008, the Russian Gross Domestic Product per capita was more than three times that of Georgia (USD 15,800 versus USD 5,000),<sup>38</sup> and for many South Ossetians Russia undoubtedly has seemed more developed and capable than Georgia. Moreover, by authorising itself, in early 1992, to defend throughout the former Soviet space the rights of Russian citizens, “Russian-speakers” and other groups in need of protection, Russia to some extent succeeded in creating an image of itself as a selfless and potent actor which could easily put local governments in their place.

As noted the soft power muscle cannot be flexed. Instead, actors have to draw attention to their norms and behaviour. Russia has had practically unlimited access to a South Ossetian audience through ordinary television and radio broadcasts, newspapers and internet sites. But, in recognition of the importance of being able to shape the preference of others, the central authorities have also targeted the region more directly; an example of this is the Kremlin-controlled “Caucasus Institute for Democracy”, which organises public seminars, supports cultural activities and even has a radio station, located in South Ossetia, which broadcasts in Ossetian.<sup>39</sup>

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(36) *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (8 July 1992), in CDPSP 44/27 (1992), p. 26.

(37) E.g. statements by former Georgian foreign minister Salome Zourabichvili at the conference *Used/Missed Opportunities for Conflict Prevention – The Case of Georgia’s Territorial Conflicts*, Austrian National Defence Academy, 4 March 2009.

(38) CIA – *The 2008 World Factbook*; in <www.cia.gov>. All figures are measured in Purchasing Power Parity.

(39) Nicu Popescu, “Russia’s Soft Power Ambitions”, *CEPS Policy Brief 115* (2006), p. 2.

All of this is not to suggest that the relationship between Russia and South Ossetia has been free from conflict. On the contrary, there have been numerous disagreements and the South Ossetian side has complained about a lack of Russian involvement and commitment. To illustrate, in the first half of 1992, when the Russian authorities were still discussing whether and how to get involved, their South Ossetian colleagues openly expressed dissatisfaction with "Russia's passivity and meagre assistance".<sup>40</sup> And, so it should be kept in mind, despite successive direct appeals made over the years by South Ossetia to Russia to help it change its international legal status, the break-through did not occur before August 2008.

### **Civilian power**

From this varied toolbox, two types of political power deserve mentioning. The first is the campaign, particularly strong after the election in 2001 of hard-liner Kokoiti to the position of president of South Ossetia, of offering passports "confetti-style" to the South Ossetians. As a result of this campaign, the overwhelming majority (+90 per cent) of South Ossetians held Russian citizenship when war broke out in August 2008.<sup>41</sup> As just noted, already in early 1992, Russia had authorised itself to act in defence of Russian citizens, and Medvedev did not hesitate to justify the military involvement in the conflict with reference to the need to protect Russians; in an 8 August 2008 statement, he explained that

"Civilians, women, children and old people, are dying today in South Ossetia, and the majority of them are citizens of the Russian Federation. In accordance with the Constitution and the federal laws, as President of the Russian Federation it is my duty to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they may be. It is these circumstances that dictate the steps we will take now. We will not allow the deaths of our fellow citizens to go unpunished. The perpetrators will receive the punishment they deserve".<sup>42</sup>

Along similar lines, when in 2001 Russia introduced visa requirements for Georgians, South Ossetians were exempted.<sup>43</sup> This way, Russia could restrict the free movement of labour, on which Georgia has been so dependent, without doing damage to South Ossetia.

The second type of political power that should be mentioned is the status and legitimacy which Moscow has bestowed on Kokoiti by referring to him, even be-

(40) *Moskovskiy novosti* (21 June 1992), in *CDPSP 44/25* (1992), p. 5

(41) Jakob Hedenskog and Robert Larsson, *Russian Leverage on the CIS and the Baltic States* (Stockholm: FOI 2007), p. 35.

(42) *Statement on the Situation in South Ossetia* (8 August 2008); in <[www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru)>, accessed 28 February 2009.

(43) Hedenskog and Larsson, *Russian Leverage on the CIS and the Baltic States*, p. 35.

fore the official recognition of the sovereignty of South Ossetia, as “president”.<sup>44</sup> This has been a subtle but also highly symbolic way of raising the status of the region to something approaching the “official relations” introduced in April 2008. The political support has been accompanied by economic support. The Russian state has paid pensions – higher than those provided by the Georgian state – to residents of South Ossetia, and it has provided subsidised goods as well as undertaken major investments in the regions’ infrastructure, thereby financing a large part of its development while at the same time bringing the region closer to Russia.<sup>45</sup> It is estimated that the Russian authorities have been providing as much as 60 per cent of the yearly budget revenue of South Ossetia in direct support.<sup>46</sup>

As with the visa regime, South Ossetia has also been exempted from the trade restrictions imposed by Russia on Georgia. Already in late 1991, the Russian government decided to postpone the signing of a trade agreement with Georgia until the situation in South Ossetia had stabilised.<sup>47</sup> And in mid-1992, sanctions were then threatened.<sup>48</sup> Since then, economic sanctions have been imposed on numerous occasions, but they have not targeted South Ossetia.

Even after a deliberate effort to re-direct trade away from Russia, Georgia is still quite dependent on the Russian market. Thus, 2007 trade figures show that trade with Russia represents 11 per cent of total Georgian trade; from this trade, Georgia suffered a deficit of USD 622 m.<sup>49</sup> By contrast, Georgia does not even figure among Russia’s 20 main trade partners. Clearly, Georgia has been – and still is – relatively sensitive to trade restrictions imposed for instance because of the conflict over South Ossetia.

### **Normative power**

Two aspects of the normative power seem of particular importance. The first is the way in which the conflict has been construed by the Russian authorities and media. From the very beginning of the conflict, strong voices in Russia argued that Russian involvement was needed to prevent genocide against the people of South Ossetia. Thus, in mid-1992, Ruslan Khasbulatov, then chairman of the Supreme Soviet and a leading opposition figure to then Russian president Boris Yeltsin, described the policy of the Georgian government as “genocide”, and he warned that Russia might consider sending troops or even annexing the region in order to protect the local population; these views were echoed by his ally then

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(44) Nicu Popescu, “‘Outsourcing’ de facto Statehood: Russia and the Secessionist Entities in Georgia and Moldova, *CEPS Policy Brief* 109 (2006), p. 6.

(45) *Ibid.*, p. 6.

(46) *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS: South Ossetia* (8 September 2008).

(47) *In Izvestiya* (12 December 1991), in *CDSP* 43/49 (1991), p. 22.

(48) *Moskovskiye novosti* (21 June 1992), in *CDPSP* 44/25 (1992), p. 5

(49) European Commission, *Georgia - Trade Statistics* (14 October 2008), p. 4. This is with an average EUR-USD exchange rate of 1,3711 for the year 2007.

vice-president Aleksandr Rutskoy.<sup>50</sup> The Yeltsin-critical media expressed similar views. To illustrate, in April 1992 *Nezavisimaya gazeta* noted that

“against the backdrop of their demonstration of solidarity with the [Trans-Dniester] region, the Russian authorities “obliviousness” to the South Ossetia problem is being linked – and not without reason – to the new complexion of Russian foreign policy, which considers it possible to defend the rights of citizens of other countries on the basis of nationality. But only if they are Russians. South Ossetia, admittedly, has not yet succeeded in provoking the appropriate “ecstasy” among representatives of the Russian authorities”.<sup>51</sup>

And after the Supreme Soviet had rejected a June 1992 appeal from the South Ossetian authorities that the region be incorporated into Russia, *Izvestiya* predicted that

“under the present conditions, in which there is an obvious intention to implement a policy of ‘faits accomplis’ by expelling an entire people and eliminating their autonomous entity, the Russian parliament may be put in a position in which it will be forced to immediately consider this question in accordance with the expression of the people’s will and the South Ossetian authorities’ request to the Russian Supreme Soviet”<sup>52</sup>

Initially, there clearly was a strong element of domestic political fighting to this. The Russian opposition painted a picture of a hesitant administration which had lost control over the CIS space, surrendered to local governments and failed to protect the interests of those who sympathised and identified with the new Russian state. Gradually, the political centre moved along, because of either a genuine belief in the duty of Russia to act, political necessity as voters demanded action or sheer opportunism as this was a welcome opportunity for Russia to re-establish some of the lost influence in the CIS space.

It should be added that external observers have in fact described Tbilisi’s policy toward South Ossetia in terms similar to those used in Russia. Thus, Julian Birch, for instance, has explained how just prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union “the language foreshadowing a ... forcible ethnic cleansing of [South Ossetia] became increasingly apparent and the [supporters of then Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia] in particular manipulated the issue to their advantage by their use of readily intelligible populist rhetoric”. And, so he adds, when Russia became actively involved in the conflict in mid-1992, “South [Ossetia] had been

(50) *KRWE* (1992), p. 39018.

(51) *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (10 April 1992), in *CDPSP* 44/15 (1992), p. 21.

(52) *Izvestiya* (15 June 1992), in *CDPSP* 44/24 (1992), p. 16.

*de facto* largely ethnically cleansed by the Georgians...".<sup>53</sup>

This then became the main normative foundation for Russia's involvement in South Ossetia. While in general Georgia has been forced to acquiesce to a Russian military presence in South Ossetia, the occasional complaint from Tbilisi could be rejected with reference to the need for an external force to protect the minority population. The violation of Georgian state sovereignty, in other words, was legitimated with reference to the principle of humanitarian intervention, a term which really entered widespread use in the early 1990's.<sup>54</sup> The term was later widely employed by the West – including NATO – to legitimate its military actions, for instance in the former Yugoslavia, and critics of Russia therefore had to work hard to convince the global constituency that the Russian policy was wrong.

The Russian argument was brought to its natural conclusion in August 2008. In his speech on the recognition by Russia of the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Medvedev explained how

"The Georgian leadership, in violation of the [United Nations'] Charter and their obligations under international agreements and contrary to the voice of reason, unleashed an armed conflict victimizing innocent civilians ...The most inhuman way was chosen to achieve the objective – annexing South Ossetia through the annihilation of a whole people ... Saakashvili opted for genocide to accomplish his political objectives. By doing so he himself dashed all the hopes for the peaceful coexistence of Ossetians, Abkhazians and Georgians in a single state ... Russia calls on other states to follow its example [and recognise the two regions]. This is not an easy choice to make, but it represents the only possibility to save human lives".<sup>55</sup>

The second normative power aspect is the principle of recognition of secessionist entities. This was discussed briefly above, so it will suffice to note that by linking the future status of South Ossetia and other non-state entities in the CIS space to the Western policy on the former Yugoslavia, Russia tried to build a normative basis of "normalcy". This held the promise of deterring Western recognition of Kosovo, a sub-region in one of the federal entities of the former Yugoslavia, and, if this failed, of deflating Western criticism that Russia was violating international practices. The Russian scholar and commentator Andranik Migranyan illustrated this view well in a 2004 article, when noting that

"generally speaking, I do not see any legal or international barriers to recognizing the independence of [Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Trans-Dniester] in consideration of the practices that the Western countries demonstrated toward

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(53) In Julian Birch, "Ossetiya – land of uncertain frontiers and manipulative elites", *Central Asian Survey* 18/4 (1999), pp. 503 and 506.

(54) Danish Institute of Foreign Affairs, *Humanitær intervention* (Copenhagen: DUPI 1999), pp. 13-14.

(55) *Statement by President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev* (26 August 2008); in [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru), accessed 26 February 2009.

the republics of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia”, adding that “if Russia develops an interest in recognizing the legitimacy of those states on the basis of international law, there are no barriers that prevent it from doing so”.<sup>56</sup>

When explaining to Russian viewers his decision to recognise the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Medvedev explained that prior to the outbreak of fighting in early August 2008, “we repeatedly called for returning to the negotiating table and did not deviate from this position of ours *even after* the unilateral proclamation of Kosovo’s independence”, thereby suggesting that by recognising Kosovo, the West had established a precedent which could be applied to South Ossetia also.<sup>57</sup>

And in another interview on Russian TV a few days later, Medvedev justified his action with reference to arguments similar to those laid out by Migranyan. Thus, while first assuring the viewers that the other SCO members did indeed “understand the motivations for the decisions that Russia has taken”, he went on to explain that

“Recognition is a separate issue. I want to remind you that each country makes its own individual decision on recognition. There is no collective action in this situation. Take the example of Kosovo. It is clear that in this situation some countries will agree to emergence of new states, while others will consider their emergence untimely. But according to international law, a new state becomes a subject of law, as the lawyers say, from the moment it gains recognition from at least one other country”.<sup>58</sup>

The rules that apply to Western-supported non-state entities, so the argument on which Russia builds part of its normative power goes, should not differ from those that apply to Russian-supported non-state entities.<sup>59</sup>

### **Military power**

As indicated, originally there was some disagreement in Russia over whether to deploy troops in South Ossetia. In fact, a 1991 decision by the Russian Supreme Soviet ruled out the use of Russian troops for the resolution of ethnic conflicts in any of the other Soviet republics.<sup>60</sup> And when, by the end of the year, Russia then took over former Soviet interior ministry troops stationed in South Ossetia, they were quickly pulled out.<sup>61</sup>

(56) Andranik Migranyan, “Georgia Propelling Its Disintegration”, *Russia in Global Affairs* 2/4 (2004), p. 123.

(57) *Statement by President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev* (26 August 2008); in <www.mid.ru>; accessed 14 February 2009, emphasis added.

(58) *Interview given by Dmitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Rossia, NTV* (31 August 2008); transcripts available at <www.kremlin.ru>, accessed 27 February 2009.

(59) For a discussion of this, see e.g. “South Ossetia is not Kosovo”, *The Economist* (28 August 2008).

(60) *Izvestiya* (21 February 1991), in *CDSP* 42/8 (1991), p. 27.

(61) *KRWE* (1992), p. 38926. This was in April 1992.

The examples given above showed, however, that there was strong political and media pressure on the then Russian administration to act and to order Russian troops back into the region. Eventually, an agreement was reached on 24 June 1992 which paved the way for Russian troops to be deployed in South Ossetia. Only the day before, a Russian government statement made clear that Russia “will take all necessary measures to defend the human rights, lives and dignity of the region’s population and to restore peace and law and order”.<sup>62</sup>

As part of the agreement, (non-UN sanctioned) peacekeepers were introduced. At first, they included a force of about 1,500 men in a combination of Russian and Ossetian (South and North) troops in addition to Georgian troops.<sup>63</sup> Approximately half of these were Russian troops. The number decreased rapidly later in the conflict and early into the 2000’s, only approximately 500 Russian and Ossetian troops were left in the region.<sup>64</sup> In addition to these figures, non-peacekeeping Russian military personnel have also been present in the region.

The Russian peacekeepers have often been accused of bias, for instance by turning a blind eye to the transfer of arms from Russian to the South Ossetian rebels.<sup>65</sup> Even more critically, Russian forces have been accused of having aided the rebels in combat activities, for instance through the use of artillery or even un-marked aircrafts for reconnaissance or bombings.<sup>66</sup> In this way, the largely asymmetrical conflict between the few (about 3,100) and ill-equipped South Ossetian forces and the more numerous (about 27,000) and more well-equipped Georgian forces was somewhat balanced out through Russian involvement.<sup>67</sup> A quick look at the military capabilities of Russia and Georgia indicate the relatively little effort required by the former to leave a decisive impact on the force distribution of South Ossetia and Georgia; this is especially so given the fact that Russia borders directly not only on Georgia but also on South Ossetia. Thus, at an estimated USD 35,369 m, the 2007 Russian defence budget is 60 times larger than the Georgian budget (at a much more modest USD 592 m).<sup>68</sup> And the estimated 660,000 Russian troops outnumber the Georgian troops by a factor of 24.<sup>69</sup>

As Russian troops moved into South Ossetia in 1992, cautious voices in Russia warned that the use of force could prove detrimental to Russia’s interests.

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(62) *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (23 June 1992), in *CDPSP 44/25* (1992), p. 1.

(63) E.g. *SIPRI Yearbook 1997* (Oxford: OUP 1997), p. 79, note 75.

(64) *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS: South Ossetia* (8 September 2008).

(65) Hedenskog and Larsson, *Russian Leverage on the CIS and the Baltic States*, pp. 98 and 101. Former Russian prime minister Yevgeniy Primakov claims that the un-marked aircrafts have been deployed by corrupt Russian officers and not by the Russian government; in *Gody v bolshoy politike* (Moscow: Sovershenno sekretno 1999), p. 417.

(66) Hedenskog and Larsson, *Russian Leverage on the CIS and the Baltic States*, pp. 107-108.

(67) *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS: South Ossetia* (8 September 2008) and *Georgia* (5 November 2008).

(68) *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*; in <[www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org)>.

(69) *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS: Russia* (20 October 2008) and *Georgia* (5 November 2008).

To illustrate, an editorial in *Moskovskie novosti* made the argument that “at this point we can defend our interests in the ‘hot spots’ of the near foreign countries [that is, the former Soviet Union] only by political and economic methods. Force will not do. It is dangerous for [us]”.<sup>70</sup>

But in general the move toward a greater role for the military in the country’s foreign policy was welcomed. Then presidential advisor Sergei Stankevich argued that the relative stability brought to South Ossetia after the signing of the June 1992 agreement was caused by the more active and hard-hitting Russian policy; thus, so explained, “until recently Russia did not have a finished, clearly and publicly formulated position on [the] conflict, nor did it have its own policy – an energetic and consistent one – that made use of the full arsenal of lawful methods and means”.<sup>71</sup>

Essentially, Stankevich’s comments reflected a belief in a particular strategic culture, that is, a set of ideas about the way in which politics should interact with military power.<sup>72</sup> Generally speaking, it is a Russian strategic culture based on zero-sum thinking and dichotomised views of the actors involved; it relies quite heavily on negative military power (“punishment”) which is easily employed unilaterally; moreover, unless the potential costs are prohibitively high, the military power is introduced at an early stage of a conflict or even pre-emptively.<sup>73</sup>

The manifestation of this strategic culture, at least within the context of “peacemaking” and “peacekeeping”, is seen most clearly perhaps in Chechnya, where Russian troops have been assigned an overwhelming role and where the use of force has led the republic to a state of near-total destruction; this conflict illustrates yet another aspect of the strategic culture of present-day Russia – its low aversion to casualties, foreign as well as own. A strategic culture like this, needless to say, serves as an impediment to successful and peaceful conflict resolution as it raises the costs for other actors involved.

## Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to point to four defining features of the conflict over South Ossetia. The first feature is the Russian strategic culture, which has added to the already strongly dichotomised nature of the conflict; the Russian black-and-white view of the conflict (if not increasingly the world) and willingness to go to extreme military lengths, as illustrated during the August 2008 war, has made it harder for the parties involved to reach a peaceful and negotiated settlement. And it will make it harder for them in the future also.

(70) *Moskovskie novosti* (14 March 1993), in *CDPSP* 45/10 (1993), p. 22.

(71) *Rossiyskaya gazeta* (28 July 1992), in *CDPSP* 44/30 (1992), p. 20.

(72) E.g. Cristoph Meyer, *The Quest for a European Strategic Culture* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan 2006), chapter 2.

(73) E.g. Julie Wilhelmsen and Geir Flikke, “Evidence of Russia’s Bush Doctrine in the CIS”, *European Security* 14/3 (2005), pp. 387-417 and Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, “In the Transatlantic Gap – Between the Modern and the Postmodern”, *Russia in Global Affairs* 2/4 (2004), pp. 91-104.

The second feature is the Russian normative power, which is being built up in so many different areas. In the 2000's, the Kremlin, often supported by non-Western allies, has been increasingly good at playing the normative card; this is true, for instance, for the lack of democracy in Russia, the heavy use of military power in Chechnya and support for South Ossetia. Now more than before, the Kremlin understands the importance of influencing world opinion, and it will use this insight to shape the understanding of the international public of "acceptable standards of behaviour" on secessionist entities.

The third feature is the neighbour status and relative importance of Russia to South Ossetia as well as to Georgia proper. This has made it easier for Georgia to project its power – especially military and civilian – to reward and to punish, respectively, South Ossetia and Georgia. This has offered Russia a greater deal of control over the two parties.

The fourth and final feature is the Russian soft power. This conflict is remarkable – though not unique – in the fact that the seceding entity wants to join another state; if this does indeed happen, it will most likely be in a long-term perspective as Russia should be expected to avoid provoking further the international community by incorporating South Ossetia into its own territory too soon. However the outcome of this, the positive feelings of the South Ossetians toward the Russians – reciprocated in turn – may very likely have caused Russia to get involved more determinedly than it would otherwise have done.

Overall, it should be noted that the Russian recognition of the sovereignty of South Ossetia has of course only served to exacerbate tension over the region. While it is unrealistic – even in a perspective of several decades – that Georgia should accept the secession of South Ossetia, it is equally unrealistic that the region should want to return to Georgia on its own. And, as suggested, Russia can only accept the return of South Ossetia to Georgia at heavy reputational costs. The conflict, simply put, has become even more frozen than it was before August 2008.