

Georgia: The song remains the same

April 2023

As the fifteen-year anniversary of Vladimir Putin's first attempt at recreating the Soviet Union approaches, the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the brief conflict that resulted needs to be reassessed: both as a military offensive on its own terms, and as part of a Kremlin grand strategy that has only intensified in the years since. Not only did that short war indicate beyond prior doubt that Putin was ripping up the playbook for how 21st century politics would be conducted, but what followed proved that Russia was changing the rules of the game while the rest of Europe was not even sure that there was a game to play. Fifteen years on, and the lesson still has not been learned.



The invasion of Georgia was Putin's first explicit testing of a European pressure point. Ostensibly conducted as a 'peacekeeping' operation against alleged Georgian genocide in the contested provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and prompted by NATO's decision to consider full Georgian membership, the conflict – which lasted barely five days – had three Russian aims, in increasing order of likelihood. First, expansion of zones of direct military and political control: always remote, given that Russian targeting was very selective. While military bases were established in the two provinces, this was not a war the success of which would be judged by territorial acquisition. Second, re-establishing Moscow as a major player in Eastern European affairs and using the war (or the threat of a repeat) to make inroads of politics and influence across Georgia. It is interesting to note that trade with Russia has only increased since the war, and pro-Russian oligarchs and politicians have increasing sway. And third, the Kremlin was bluntly attempting to see what it could get away with, on the basis that anything would be a victory.

Thus it transpired: a permanent military presence in the contested provinces accounting for 20% of Georgian territory, an end to serious consideration of Georgia acceding to NATO, the proving of superior Russian military and cyber capabilities in a conflict zone, and increased power in the Balkan sphere of influence that Russia has always felt to be naturally hers – and all this with barely a whimper from the West.

So scott-free did Putin emerge after his first invasion of another sovereign power, that when one draws the line from Georgia to Crimea to Ukraine – and a line of this nature absolutely must be drawn to understand both what Russia attempted to achieve and why she achieved so much, for so long – the real question is not whether this was an inevitability, but why it did not happen so much sooner.

This then was Georgia in 2008, the most public and ‘hot’ expression of Putin’s war on the West yet seen, until superseded by the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year. However, hot conflict zones are just one element of the Kremlin’s grand strategy to distract, destabilise and disempower. Alongside the classic military elements of the Georgian campaign was the first ever real-time cyber-war, which would be more notable were it not for the fact that cyber warfare has long been the true preserve of Russian superiority (in both actively destructive and insidious disinformation forms) and is both far broader in scope, and more effective, than the military action.

The Georgia conflict also served notice to the Balkans and Eastern Europe that one ignores Russia at ones peril – with applications from politicians and business elites to ensure they are on the ‘winning side’ open and please leave your blank cheques at the door. Certainly, Georgia has been fertile ground in this regard for Moscow as well: the party in power since 2012, Georgian Dream, has displayed creeping pro-Kremlin tendencies culminating in a ‘foreign agents’ bill said by the President to be ‘dictated by Russia’ and only dropped after mass protests (although with the party’s broad direction unchanged), and its founder, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, made his millions in Russia and is known to be extremely close to Putin.

Georgia as it is now, is a fine example of Putin’s grand strategy that is focused far more on subtlety and manipulation in all forms other than blunt force: a broadly sympathetic ruling party, a corporate elite either facilitating Russian corruption or terrified of the consequences of refusal, a laxity across the legal and regulatory sector that allows for money laundering and larceny on a grand scale, a key opposition voice (Mikhail Saakashvili) arrested and silenced on trumped-up charges... one might think that this is not T’bilisi at all, but Moscow. The fact that it remains avowedly Georgia speaks to Putin’s greatest success, and Europe’s on-going problem: rather than doing it yourself, it is always best if you can make your neighbours do it for you.

The particular challenge for corporates, is that they are an integral part of this grand strategy, whether falling prey to the corruption and coercive control so regularly exercised by Russian-linked elements when doing business across Eastern Europe and the Balkans (including Ukraine), or being used as unwitting (or, more darkly, willing) ‘patsies’ to enhance influence and/or chaos, as necessary, back home.

While not diminishing the horror and the tragedy of the invasion of Ukraine, it is in this sphere that Russia's 'permanent war' is most strongly, and successfully, fought. And if it is unwise for the West to have only begun to take Russian invasions seriously after the third one, it is downright unethical to continue to gloss over the scale and impact of the strategy that was, largely, made plain back in 2008.

The Kremlin has continued to sing from the Georgian hymn sheet in the intervening fifteen years. The annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine are the most strident solos, but Russian networks have been harmonising across the West to the same tune: distract, disrupt and disarm... in the mental sense, if not the physical one. Consider: the disinformation campaigns run from Eastern Europe designed to spread fear and lies about politics, vaccines and everything in-between; the sanctions-busting money laundering activities through assorted banks that find their way through to shell companies and properties across Western Europe; (to give but one example) the transportation of oil from South America via India to Europe building lines of both political, and economic, influence worldwide; the proving ground of cyber-attacks as the most effective means of disturbing peace and order... all of this had a practical foundation in Georgia, in either the immediate invasion or its aftermath, and very little has changed since.

KCS Group Europe - Strategic Intelligence & Corporate Security

A leading provider of security and intelligence services, we operate discreetly in some of the world's most difficult environments on complex cases of fraud, theft, corruption, or market dynamics. We gather intelligence through the discreet use of human sources to level the playing field and help our clients identify and deal with any risks, weaknesses and threats which could impact on their business, financially or reputationally.

Our key areas of expertise include:

Corporate Intelligence Services - New market or sector entry research - Know your customer screening.

In addition, we offer a unique service in the areas of Cyber Security and Cyber Risk. This covers penetration testing, vulnerability assessments, intelligence gathering and cyber security audits - providing unparalleled analysis, contingency planning, and implementation.

To find out more or to arrange a meeting to discuss your business needs, please email the team at info@kcsgroupeurope.com or call (00 44) 2072451191.
