

Under Russia's Shadow – Why We “No Longer Care” About the Occupied Territories?!

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which marked a full-scale war against a sovereign nation, disrupted the liberal world order. It made Russia's revisionist and imperialist intentions even more evident and set Yevgeniy Primakov's ambitious Eurasianist doctrine² into motion. This doctrine suggests that Russia should establish a new empire and become a central Eurasian "Heartland." It was the essence of this doctrine that guided Putin when, in 2005, he declared that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.³ Subsequently, in his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference,⁴ he shamelessly displayed all these aspirations, which are incompatible with the international order. We are now witnessing how these aspirations are pursued in Ukraine and observed them in 2008 in Georgia.

This large-scale Russian aggression has become a source of great concern and a significant challenge for the former Soviet republics, as well as for the rest of the world. In the initial stages, there was a fear, not entirely unfounded, that Russia would not stop with Ukraine. Today, this fear has been somewhat alleviated, not because Putin's Russia has abandoned its aggressive tendencies, but due to Ukraine's resilience and military capabilities, which have shattered Russia's image as an invincible superpower. History is replete with examples of underestimating adversaries,⁵ where larger nations have fallen victim to the survival instincts and aspirations of smaller countries, suffering considerable damage. It is also crucial to emphasize the Western support and unity with regard to Ukraine, which has made a significant contribution to Ukraine still being a sovereign nation with the capacity to defend itself.

Perhaps more than anyone else, Georgia and our society are acutely aware of the devastating consequences that result when Russia designates you as part of its sphere of influence and targets you. Initially, Russia took away Abkhazia and Samachablo, dividing Georgia. Subsequently, it initiated the August War, leading to further territorial losses and stifling our development prospects. During a peaceful

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² Clover, C. (1999). Dreams of the Eurasian heartland the reemergence of geopolitics. *Foreign Affairs*, 78(2), 9-13.

³ Putin: Soviet collapse a “genuine tragedy”. Via URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057>.

⁴ Putin's Munich Speech 2007. Via URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQ58Yv6kP44>.

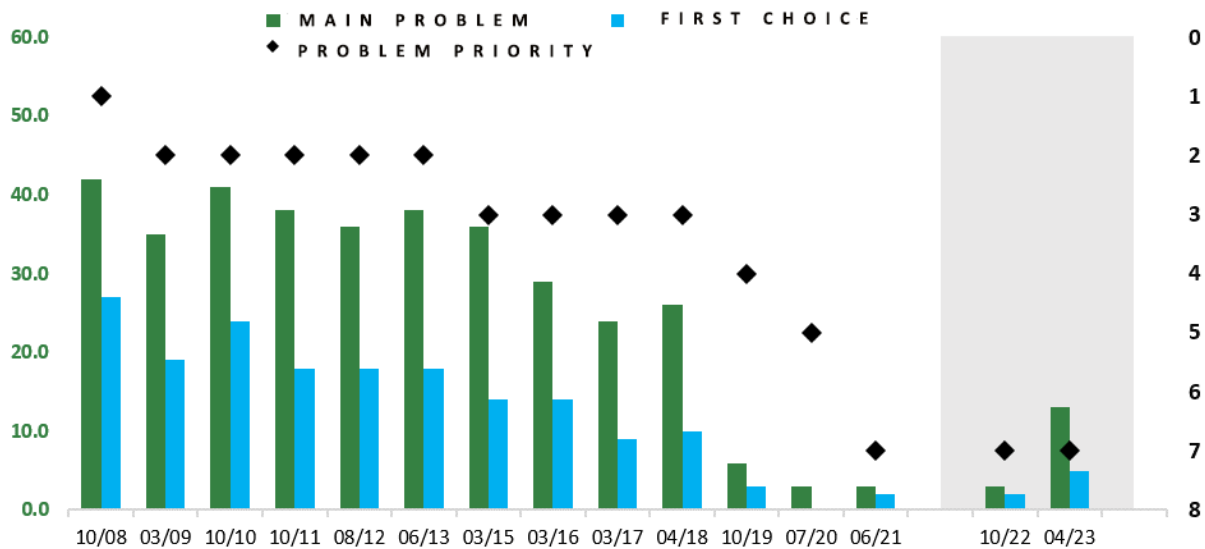
⁵ For instance, USSR - Afghanistan (1979-1989), USSR - Finland (1939-1940), USA - Vietnam (1959 – 1975).

transition period, Russian tanks rolled in, employing soft power tactics and sowing division within our society, ultimately pushing us into deep polarization. While we must acknowledge our own shortcomings, Moscow has consistently played a significant role as the primary instigator and provocateur, contributing to the unrest. Building a free and democratic country under Russia's shadow is exceptionally challenging, as any attempts at development are met with both hard and soft power attacks, along with hybrid methods. Even a strong and developed country would likely struggle to establish freedom and democracy under our geopolitical circumstances. If the West was not sufficiently convinced in 2008 (or we could not convince the West), events from 2022 to 2023 have clearly demonstrated that being Russia's neighbor and object of interest while pursuing peaceful development are fundamentally incompatible.

After the August 2008 war, our concern regarding the occupied territories, as a society that had endured the war, was particularly high. If we examine public opinion surveys, such as those from September to October 2008, we can see that the most pressing issue for Georgian society was territorial integrity, with the major concerns being Russian aggression and the possibility of a renewed war.⁶ This is understandable: the tragedy of the war compelled us to set aside all other worries and focus solely on the loss of territorial integrity and the blatant violation of our sovereignty. Subsequent surveys indicated that over the years, our concerns regarding the occupied territories gradually decreased. In recent years, these concerns have reduced drastically and, in some cases, have even disappeared.

⁶International Republican Institute (IRI). 2008 September-October. Georgian National Study. Via URL: <https://shorturl.at/HPRS9> (9.05.2023).

Chart 1: IRI Public Opinion Survey – Proportion (%) and Priority of the Territorial Integrity Issue on the Question: “What is the most important problem facing our country today?”



Source: International Republican Institute (IRI)

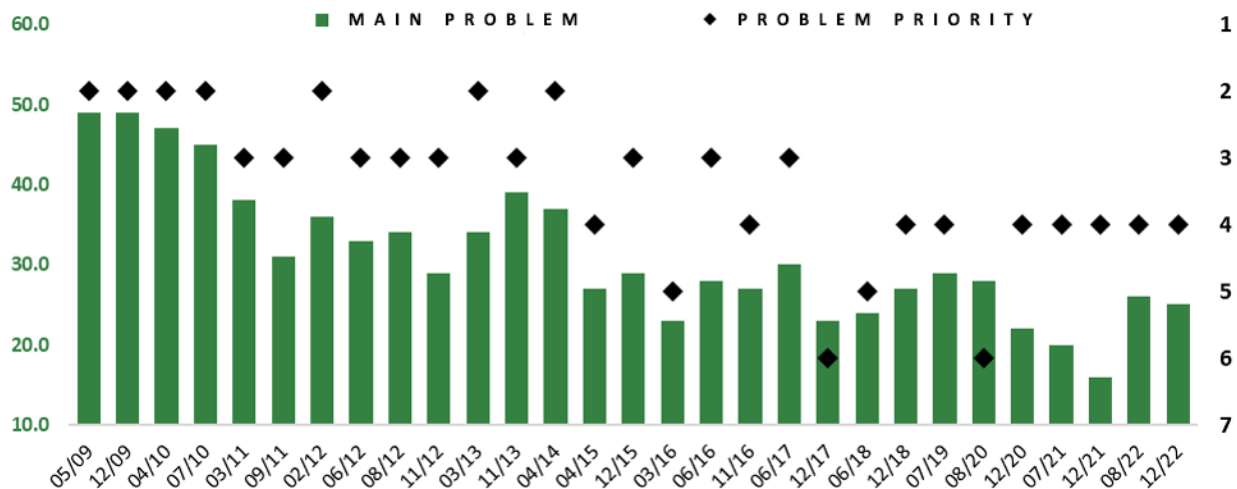
As shown in Chart 1, from 2008 to 2015, the issue of lost territories due to occupation was a significant concern for approximately 35-45% of the respondents⁷ in IRI's public opinion survey. In 2008, this concern was at its peak and was identified as the most pressing problem. Over the subsequent years, this figure consistently declined, and the priority of the problem also shifted. For example, in 2016, occupation was the primary challenge for 29% of those surveyed, ranking as the third most important issue. From 2019 to 2021, concerns related to territorial integrity saw a drastic drop. In 2021, occupation was the primary challenge for only 3% of respondents, ranking as the 7th most important concern for the population. It fell significantly behind issues like unemployment, high prices, poverty, the COVID pandemic, and education problems. Regarding the past two years, it's noteworthy that in the same question, the issue of occupied territories was not listed as a separate problem in the 2022-2023 surveys and was not included in the list of responses. However, approximately 7-8% of the population expressed concern vis-à-vis internal or external conflicts.⁸

⁷ The concern of respondents regarding the occupied territories falls within the margin of 35-45% in the IRI public opinion surveys during the period from 2008 to 2015.

⁸ International Republican Institute (IRI). 2008-2023. Polls. Via URL: https://www.iri.org/resources/?resource_type=poll&country=georgia (8.05.2023).

In terms of general trends the picture is nearly identical in NDI's surveys, too. Although NDI asks the respondents to name only three main problems for the similar question and therefore answers are limited, the trend shows that picture very much resembles to that of IRI's. In 2009, almost half (49%) of those surveyed was concerned about territorial integrity while in 2021 that figure dropped to merely 16%.

Chart 2: Proportion (%) and Priority of the Territorial Integrity Issue in the NDI's Survey's Most Important



Source: National Democratic Institute (NDI)

Why is it that we seem to no longer care about territorial integrity? Why has the issue of occupation faded from our everyday lives?

First and foremost, we must consider the factor of time, as protracted conflicts, especially "frozen" conflicts, tend to lead to a diminishing interest among the population. The occupying country continually alters the so-called border through various means like borderization, which involves man-made barriers, fences, and barbed wires. Moreover, it doesn't hesitate to engage in kidnapping and illegal imprisonment of individuals from the so-called borderline regions – sometimes in exchange for ransom, and sometimes simply as a display of power to remind us that they can act with impunity. Despite these actions, the status quo remains largely unchanged for many years. This undoubtedly affects our collective memory. Over time, our recollection of the 1992-1993 war becomes even more fragile, and generational change works in favor of the occupier. We have increasingly blurry memory of a united Georgia, and the memories of Abkhazians and Ossetians when they regarded themselves not as independent (or/and possibly reliant on Russia) entities (states), but rather as integral parts of a united Georgia, are gradually fading away. There

are generations on both sides of the border who have never seen Abkhazia and Georgia as integral parts of a united Georgia. Furthermore, it's worth noting that today, 20.7% of the Georgian population was born in 2008 or later, meaning that one-fifth of the population has not witnessed the events of the August 2008 war, let alone experienced Abkhazia and Samachablo as part of Georgia.

The decrease in interest regarding this issue can be attributed to the abundance of other problems. Unemployment, poverty, inflation, and various economic challenges have a more immediate and tangible impact on our daily lives compared to other issues. Therefore, it is not surprising that, for example, in NDI's public opinion surveys where respondents are asked to name the three main problems, issues like rising prices, poverty, and job scarcity leave little room for listing additional concerns. In this regard, it's possible that we have not diminished our concerns about occupation but rather have started to prioritize other issues.

One of the noteworthy factors may be the indifferent attitude of politicians and decision-makers toward this issue. The significance of the issue should ideally have a spillover effect, either from the grassroots narratives to political narratives or vice versa, where politicians and decision-makers create narratives for the public. However, it's evident that, for quite some time, the former group has bid farewell to the occupied territories, and their actions are limited to attending memorials during "memorial days" and including didactic phrases in their election programs, which lack substance and a specific action plan.

Moreover, in response to highly disturbing statements made by the de facto top political officials from the other side of the so called "border", Georgian authorities often opt for silence. They also tend to respond to the statements of Russian politicians with silence and moral capitulation.

On March 23, 2023, the self-proclaimed President of occupied Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, made a statement in his speech: "In military-political terms, there is an extremely challenging international situation. Russia is compelled to conduct a special military operation. Over 50 nations are arrayed against our ally, including all of Europe and the USA. In this context, these same forces seek to overthrow the Georgian government and open a second front." This statement by Aslan Bzhania can be viewed as a partial continuation of the significant turmoil among the populations of the occupied territories, which ensued after massive protests in Tbilisi in early March against the Russian law on so-called "agents." Simultaneously with these protests, Russian officials sowed panic and confusion in Abkhazia and Samachablo. For instance, on March 10, 2023, Putin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, stated that Moscow was concerned and there were substantial risks of aggression in Abkhazia and Samachablo. The primary

message of the Russian narrative was that the West sought to open a second front against Russia in Abkhazia and Samachablo.

We've heard the propaganda message of a "second front" in Georgia far too many times. The phrase "What, do you want war?!" has become the default response to any demand or protest in our reality. If you express discontent with road quality, you "want war." If you're concerned about inflation, you "want war." If you protest that the EU's 12 priorities are not being addressed, you "want war," and so on.

This propaganda message about the "global war party" follows a similar playbook that was initially employed in Russia⁹ and has found a prominent place in Georgian discourse. We've been living in a dystopian reality for over a year, where the concept of a "second front" conspired by the "global war party" has taken root. The logical consequence of this rhetoric is that we've forgotten about our occupied territories and the narratives emerging from there. These narratives should be subject to intense criticism, but we've come to care less about them. In a different reality, we might have made every effort to challenge Bzhania's words, but it's challenging to do so when you've wrapped yourself in the cloak of the "peace party" and labeled all other parties or rival entities as being manipulated by the West and accused them of seeking to provoke a global war.

Another reason we might think less about Abkhazia and Samachablo is the stagnation and freeze, which, similar to the conflict, afflicts the main negotiation platform, the Geneva Talks. The Geneva meetings seem to be entirely unproductive and lack concrete results. It might be argued that having some format for parties to meet and at least engage in dialogue is better than having no format at all. However, the reality is that the low-level negotiation teams, the closed nature of the meetings, and Russia's insistence on portraying itself as a negotiator rather than a party to the conflict erode trust in the format. Information about each new round of negotiations has the same impact on the public as a weather

⁹ Завтра 2013. "В сложившихся финансово-экономических и социально-политических условиях глобальная "партия войны" и её американское отделение в том числе, вряд ли откажутся от искушения решить все проблемы путем военной агрессии — и Vae victis! ("Горе побежденным!"). Accessible at: <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/vojna-otstupila>.

ТАСС 2016. Эксперт: эскалация в Крыму выгодна глобальной "партии войны". Accessible at: <https://tass.ru/politika/3527224> (15.05.2023).

Regnum.ru 2017. "Если же проиграет Меркель — то это будет второй огромной силы удар по евроатлантизму после проигрыша в прошлом году на президентских выборах в США Хиллари Клинтон, чего глобальная партия войны никак допустить не может". Accessible at: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2321111.html>.

forecast. The periods before and after the Geneva rounds do not create a narrative that prompts us to think about the occupation.

Perhaps, there are plenty of other factors, although a common thread leads back to Russia. Time plays into the hands of Russian occupation, allowing us to forget the suffering it has caused. Russia has also put on hold our potential to escape poverty and integrate within the Western economic space, largely with our cooperation. The political rhetoric about the "second front" is a miniature representation of Russian propaganda, which is tailor-made for our reality.

And most importantly, Russia is a party to the conflict in Abkhazia and Samachablo. Unless it is removed and excluded from the conflict, achieving any real transformation in the situation will remain unattainable.

Why have we "stopped caring" about the occupied territories? Because we are living under Russia's shadow. And if we do care, why does our everyday life seem to convey the opposite message?