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DIVERSIONARY ROLE OF CONFLICTS IN EASTERN UKRAINE AND GEORGIA: WAR AT RUSSIAN FRONTIERS AS SOURCE OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER

The article aims to elucidate the nature of the Russia's intentions during the conflicts in Eastern Ukraine in 2014-2015 and Georgia in 2008. Whereas Russia's involvement in Georgia conflict was conducted during the period of economic growth and incumbents' popularity in Russia, the conflict of Ukraine coincided in time with economic stagnation of unprecedented low popularity rating of the Russian government and president. Why did the Russian government involve in similar armed conflicts under different political and economic conditions? It is argued that the domestic economic situation and the popularity of incumbents in Russia influenced the incentives to launch the conflicts in both cases: whereas in 2008 Russia enjoyed economic growth and, thus, pursued exclusively geopolitical objectives in Georgia, it used the conflict in Ukraine in order to divert public attention from domestic problems and raise the government's ratings.

Key words: armed conflict, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, diversionary theory, geopolitics.

Two recent armed conflicts in Georgia in 2008 and Eastern Ukraine in 2014 threatened stability in the immediate neighborhood of the Russian Federation. These military disputes led to increased political and strategic confrontation among the former republics of the USSR, dangers to economic growth and establishment of democratic institutions in all participating countries, as well as to devastating civilian casualties and displacements in both Georgia and Ukraine. These armed conflicts once more illustrated the level of dependency of these states on Russia's interests and the ability of the latter to employ coercion to achieve its goals.

To understand what kind of warfare repertoire should be expected from Russia it is necessary to know the incentives of parties in the armed conflict. I argue that by looking at economic problems, public support of the leadership, as well as power relations within the state, it is possible to explain the repertoires of its involvement into conflicts in neighboring states. Such illumination of conflict's roots might help to develop effective defense strategies, making weaker states more capable of protecting their borders.

Therefore, the research question is the following:

How did the Russian Federation's goals of participation in the armed conflicts in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and Georgia in 2008 influence the warfare repertoires in each case?

More specifically, the research is focused on the comparative study of the incentives of Russian involvement in armed conflicts in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and Georgia in 2008. The investigation is aimed at illumination of the goals of Russian government in each case with regard to both geopolitical and domestic reasons. Elucidation of linkages between these goals and the intensity and duration of military confrontation will help answer the research question.

The research will be concentrated on testing the following hypothesis:

H1: The government's willingness to increase the public support and divert its attention from domestic issues is inversely proportional to the intensity of armed conflicts at its frontiers.

In other words, if the government's interest in diverting public attention from domestic problems is high, the war will be conducted at slow pace, with low intensity, and limited engagement of troops. In such a way, public attention will be diverted during long period of time (mass-media and government will focus public attention on foreign, rather than domestic problems), whereas losses and casualties of war will be limited and, thus, will not provoke negative attitudes among society. If government's interest in diverting public attention is low (in case economic growth is ongoing and the country's leadership is popular), the war will be intense and rapid, since its main goal is to achieve regional redistribution of power, not to shift public's attention from domestic issues. The shorter the period of war, the cheaper it is to achieve foreign policy goals.

Scholars offer two types of explanations to intensifying tensions in general and armed conflicts in

particular at the frontiers of the Russian Federation. The first group argues that Russia is trying to reassert and reestablish its role of the regional hegemon, capable of influencing the policy choices of its neighbors¹. Thus, the proponents of this view argue that Russia is pursuing the geopolitical goals, which lead to conflicts with other states of the former USSR². According to Angela E. Stent, “[t]he Kremlin’s maximum goal has been to secure recognition of this [post-Soviet] area as its legitimate sphere of influence that gives Russia *a droit de regard* over its former republics”³. Therefore, Russia views the former republics of the USSR as the sphere of its direct influence and employs armed conflicts as a means to strengthen this perceived position.

The second group of scholars argues that the Russian foreign policy decisions are made with regard to its domestic interests. According to this approach, the aggressive character of foreign policy and the high level of its publicity have a direct link to the deterioration of democratic institutions in Russia⁴. Thus, the main objective of armed conflicts in the former Soviet Republics, bordering with Russia, is to divert the public attention from domestic political and economic problems and turn it to the foreign politics.

Both approaches have merits in explaining the incentives of the Russian foreign policy in its immediate neighborhood. Domestic and foreign policy motivations play complementary roles in the decision-making process with regard to armed conflicts. I argue that Russo-Georgian war in 2008 was aimed at reestablishing the Russia’s leadership position in strategically important Transcaucasia region, whereas the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 was started to divert public attention from domestic political and economic problems. Therefore, in this research two approaches are considered to have merits for explanation of separate cases.

In its turn, diversionary theory argues that “international conflicts can be launched by incumbents to divert public attention from domestic issues”⁵. The conflict can play a diversionary role only under specific conditions: when the state’s leadership fears the forced removal from power, when democratic institutions are not developed (since established democracies do not launch diversionary conflicts due to high level of transparency), when leaders are dependent on public improvement⁶. With regard to these conditions it is important to take into consideration that the risk of military dispute increases, when both states involved in it are in the process of democratic transition⁷. It means that they are not democratic

¹ Galbreath, D.J. (2008). ‘Putin’s Russia and the “New Cold War”’: Interpreting Myth and Reality’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, 9, pp. 1623–30; Kanet, R. (ed.) (2007). *Russia: Re-Emerging Great Power*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan; Mankoff, J. (2009). *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*. Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield; Wilson, E. & Torjesen, S. (2008). *The Multilateral Dimension in Russian Foreign Policy*. London, Routledge.

² Gomart, T. (2006). *Russian Foreign Policy: Strange Inconsistency*. Swindon, Conflict Studies Research Centre Defence Academy of the United Kingdom; Legvold, R. (ed.) (2007). *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past*. New York, Columbia University Press; Nygren, B. (2008). *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin’s Foreign Policy towards the CIS Countries*. New York, Routledge; Po’ti, L. (2008). Evolving Russian Foreign and Security Policy: Interpreting the Putin-Doctrine. *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, 25, 1, 29–42; Tsygankov, A. (2008). Russia’s International Assertiveness: What Does it Mean for the West? *Problems of Post-Communism*, 55, 2, 38–55.

³ Stent, A.E. (2008). Restoration and Revolution in Putin’s Foreign Policy. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, 6, 1102.

⁴ Aslund, A., Kuchins, A. (2009). *The Russia Balance Sheet*. Washington, DC, Peterson Institute for International Economics, Center for Strategic and International Studies; Blank, S. (2009). What is Living and What is Dead in the Russian Foreign Policy Tradition. *The Annual Convention of the International Studies Association*, 15–18 February. New York City; Busygina, I., Filippov, M. (2008). End Comment: EU–Russian Relations and the Limits of the Northern Dimension. Aalto, P., Blakkisrud, H., Smith, H. (eds). *The New Northern Dimension of the European Neighborhood*. Brussels, Centre for European Policy Studies, 204–19; Hassner, P. (2008). Russia’s Transition to Autocracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 19, 2, 5–15; Lukyanov, F. (2008). Interactions between Russian Foreign and Domestic Politics. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 19, 1, 17–24; Okara, A. (2007). Sovereign Democracy: A New Russian Idea or a PR Project? *Russia in Global Affairs*, 5, 3, pp. 8–20; Shevtsova, L. (2009). The Return of Personalized Power. *Journal of Democracy*, 20, 2, 61–65.

⁵ Filippov, M. (2009). Diversionary Role of the Georgia-Russia Conflict: International Constrains and Domestic Appeal. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, 10, 1827.

⁶ Filippov, M. (2009). Diversionary Role of the Georgia-Russia Conflict: International Constrains and Domestic Appeal. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, 10, 1827.

⁷ Mansfield, E.D., Snyder, J. (2002). Incomplete Democratization and the Outbreak of Military Disputes. *International Studies Quarterly*, 46, 4, 529–549.

enough to prevent the leadership to employ diversionary strategy, but public is influential enough to be taken into account. Since all post-Soviet states are still undergoing democratic transformation, the last condition applies to both Russia and its neighbors.

As it was mentioned above, the research will be focused on explaining how the type of incentives influenced the mode of armed conflict. The author differentiates between two types of incentives: 1) geopolitically motivated; 2) domestically motivated. Similarly, two modes of armed conflicts are defined, based on analyzed cases: 1) conflicts of short duration and high intensity; 2) conflicts of long duration and low intensity. Thus, the aim of the research is to find correlation between types of incentives and modes of armed conflicts.

To achieve this goal, it is necessary to find correlation between the independent and dependent variables. The independent variables are the following: economic indicators (GDP growth, fixed capital investment, inflation, unemployment, nominal change rate, national reserves, export and import of goods) and public support (approval rating of government and Vladimir Putin)¹. The economic indicators will be measured in accordance with the report on Russian economy, published by the World Bank in September 2013². The government's and Vladimir's Putin approval are assessed on the basis of sociological poll, conducted by the Levada Center³. Levada Center was selected as the most reliable source of information, since it is the only independent, non-governmental polling and sociological research organization⁴.

The analysis includes the approval rate not only of the Russian government in general, but also of Vladimir Putin, who used to be the prime minister during the armed conflict in Georgia in 2008 and the president during the armed conflict in Ukraine in 2014. Russian regime is conventionally characterized by centralized, personalized power structures, which effectively resist any appearance of opposition⁵. What is even more important, the personalization of power in Russia was also accompanied with the rise of nationalism, which is often claimed to be popularized personally by Vladimir Putin⁶.

Dependent variables are aimed at defining the mode of armed conflict. Therefore, they include the most important characteristics of military confrontation. They are duration, military strength (measured by the absolute numbers of military staff involved), military and civilian losses, as well as the number of people displaced. These indicators of armed conflict intensity were chosen in according with measuring method of Correlates of War dataset, the main supplier of reliable data used in research of external and internal armed conflicts⁷.

The cases of armed conflicts (Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014) were selected on the basis of their major characteristics (duration and intensity), which illustrate two distinct modes of military confrontation. The Russo-Georgian War was an armed conflict of short duration (5 days) and high intensity. On the other hand, so-called war in Donbas (Eastern Ukraine)

¹ Similar independent variables were employed in diversionary theory research by Pickering and Kisangani (2005); Ostrom and Job (1986); James and Oneal (1991); Oneal and Tir (2006); Hibbs (1987); MacKuen, Erickson, and Stimson (1992).

² Russia Economic Report (2014). *The World Bank in the Russian Federation*, 32, 1-54. <http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2014/10/08/000350881_20141008110829/Rendered/PDF/912390WP0WB0RE00Box385330B00PUBLIC0.pdf>.

³ June Ratings of Approval and Support (2014). *Levada Center*. <<http://www.levada.ru/26-06-2014/iyunskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>>.

⁴ Treisman, D. (2013). Why The Kremlin Hates Levada Center. *The Moscow Times*, May 24. <<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/why-the-kremlin-hates-levada-center/480433.html>>; Barry, E. (2013). Polling Group In Russia Sais it May Close. *The New York Times*, May 20. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/world/europe/russian-polling-group-says-it-may-close.html?_r=1&>; Balmforth, T. (2013). Levada Center, Russia's Most Respected Pollster, Fears Closure. *Radio Liberty*, May 21. <<http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-levada-center-foreign-agent/24992729.html>>.

⁵ Horsfield, D. (2014). Casting shadows? Authoritarianism in Putin's Russia. *Asia Europe Journal*, 12, 4, 445-456.

⁶ Teper, Y. Course, D.D. (2014). Contesting Putin's nation-building: the 'Muslim other' and the challenge of the Russian ethno-cultural alternative. *Nations & Nationalism*, 20, 4, 721-741; Cannady, S. Kubicek, P. (2014). Nationalism and legitimation for authoritarianism: A comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 5, 1, 1-9; Gerber, T.P. (2014). Beyond Putin? Nationalism and Xenophobia in Russian Public Opinion. *Washington Quarterly*, 37, 3, 113-134.

⁷ Gleditsch, N.P., Wallerstein, P., Eriksson, M., Sollenberg, Strand, M. (2002). Armed Conflict 1946-2001: A New Dataset?. *Journal of Peace Research*, 39, 5, 615-637.

currently lasts for more than 8 months and is characterized by low intensity. Thus, these two cases are particularly suitable for the purposes of this research, which aims to show correlation between Russian domestic problems in two respective years and the mode of military confrontation, applied by the Russian army in two cases.

General economic growth in the Russian Federation was much higher in 2008 than in 2014. The main economic indicators, such as GDP growth, fixed capital investment, nominal exchange rate, export and import of goods, as well as savings at reserve fund, national wealth fund and reserve (including gold) were significantly higher in 2008 than in 2014. On the other hand, inflation and unemployment decreased in 2014 in comparison with 2008, which was positive change in Russian economy (Figure 1). However, both inflation and unemployment rates rose in comparison with two previous years (2012 and 2013), which might have also contributed to the general dissatisfaction with government’s economic policy. Tracing the economic developments in Russia in 2008-2014 gives evidence that before and during the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 the economy growth remained high enough to ensure the stable economic basis for the military operation launched by the country’s leadership. In contrast, in 2014 the main economic indicators plummeted. Even before the start of the Ukrainian armed conflict international economists forecasted the further slowdown of growth, including high inflation, deteriorating fiscal outlook and decreases of private income and consumption of Russian citizens¹.

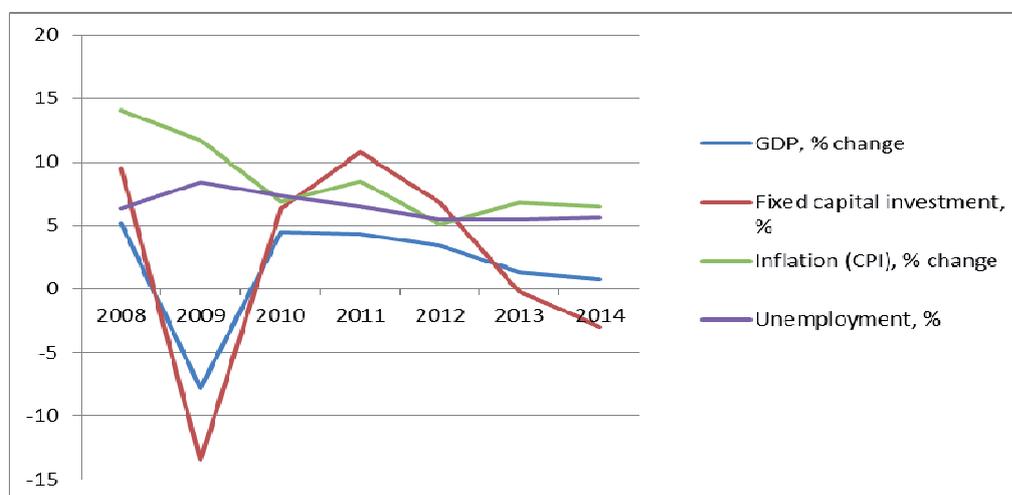


Figure 1. Main economic indicators

Source: Russia Economic Report (2014). *The World Bank in the Russian Federation*, 32, 54.

Government’s approval rate experienced considerable fluctuations within the time framework of this research. Its approval rate was the highest two months before the beginning of the armed conflict in Georgia – 63% and the lowest a month before the launch of the military confrontation in Eastern Ukraine – 43%. Therefore, it can be assumed that whereas in the first case government was not interested in diverting the public attention from the domestic issues with the aim of increasing its approval rate, in the second case such motivation could be present.

According to sociological polls, conducted by Levada Center, the highest level of approval was registered in summer 2008 (83%) and the lowest in early spring 2013 (63%). The curve, depicted on the Figure 3, reveals similar fluctuations in approval and disapproval rates to those of the Russian government. However, it must be noted that during all years the support of Putin personally remained significantly higher than of the government in general (for example, in 2008 the gap between two rates was 20%).

Thus, invasion into Georgia was conducted under extremely favorable circumstances with the highest population’s support which the Russian government and Vladimir Putin have ever experienced, while in 2014 (before the Ukrainian crisis) the situation was the opposite. Russian leadership had incentives to start the diversionary conflict only in 2014, as far as in 2008 it should have been satisfied with level of its popularity. When one looks at the dependent variables, an interesting temporal trend can be revealed. The

¹ Russian Federation: Subdued Growth Ahead Amid Geopolitical Tensions. Forecast (2014). *European Commission Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs*, 124-125. <http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/eu/forecasts/2014_spring/non_russia_en.pdf>.

Russo-Georgian war lasted for 5 days, whereas the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine continues for more than 8 months so far, and the conflict resolution is not foreseen in the nearest future. Thus, the war in Georgia was of very short duration, whereas the armed conflict in Ukraine can be characterized as long-term confrontation.

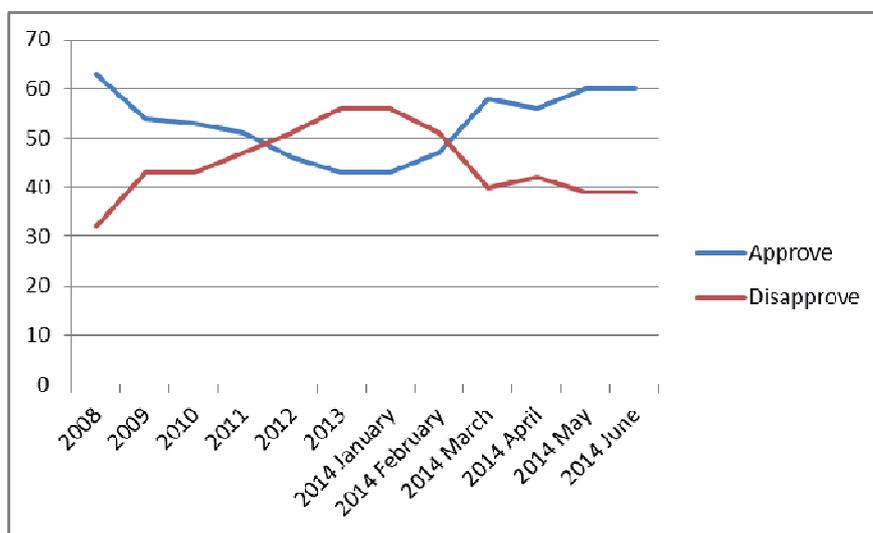


Figure 2. Russian Government's Approval Rate

Source: June Ratings of Approval and Support (2014). *Levada Center*. <<http://www.levada.ru/26-06-2014/iyunskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>>.

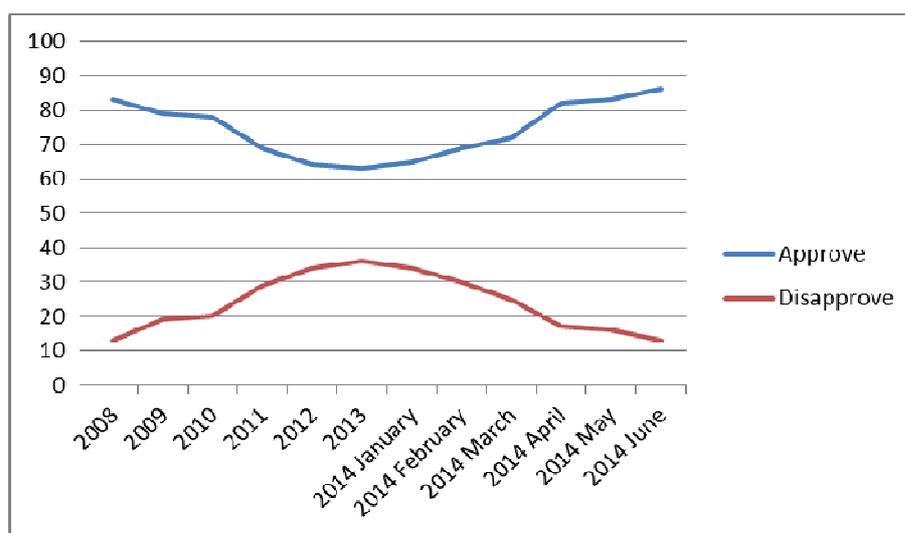


Figure 3. Vladimir Putin's Approval Rating

Source: June Ratings of Approval and Support (2014). *Levada Center*. <<http://www.levada.ru/26-06-2014/iyunskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>>.

The latter had direct influence on strength of armed conflicts. The findings, presented in the Figure 4 show that the losses of Ukrainian national army are proportionally higher than the losses of the Georgian army, which can be explained by the duration of each conflict (as it was already mentioned, Ukrainian conflict continues much longer than Georgian). Similar proportional differences are also observed in the numbers of involvement of pro-Russian insurgents in both cases. However, the participation of Russian troops dropped almost by 40% in the longer (Ukrainian) conflict. It allows to assume that the Russian Federation is not interested in the high-intensity conflict in the second case and tries to keep the involvement of its troops as limited as possible. These findings reveal that whereas the war in Georgia can be characterized as military confrontation of high intensity (with regard to the fact that during 5 days of this conflict almost 19,000 Russian troops operated on Georgian territory), the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine is of low intensity (taking into account the participation of 10,000 troops during 8 months). As the

Figure 5 shows, the military casualties in two armed conflicts resemble the warfare trends, revealed by the Figure 4. Again the casualties among the national armies and the pro-Russian insurgents were logically proportional to the duration of respective military confrontations. However, the casualties of the Russian troops in the Ukrainian case only slightly outnumbers the casualties in the Georgian case.

The debate around the diversionary theory rises three questions: 1) could Russian political incumbents be in need of a diversionary or geopolitical conflict? 2) how can it be proven? 3) what is the correlation between these incentives and the warfare repertoires. The independent variables showed that in 2008 Russia was characterized by the economic growth, stable development, low level of unemployment and inflation, etc. It logically led to general satisfaction of the mass public with the government's actions, as well as very high approval rates of Vladimir Putin¹. As a result Russia's leadership had no motivation to divert the public's attention from the domestic issues. Therefore, the armed conflict in Georgia was launched due to other reasons and the diversionary theory in this case is not applicable.

However, if to take into consideration the geopolitical importance of this conflict for Russia, it is possible to explain it with the help of neorealist approach. Russia was interested in reestablishing its status of regional hegemon, the sphere of influence of each covers all Transcaucasian area. However, the pro-Western policy of the Georgian president Saakashvili (started after the Revolution of Roses in 2003), one of the central goals of which was NATO membership of Georgia², seriously questioned the ability of Russia to have any impact on the political decision in the region in the future. In order to prevent the Georgian growing cooperation with the West and reassure its status of the influential pole in the multipolar world, Russia launched an armed conflict in Georgia.

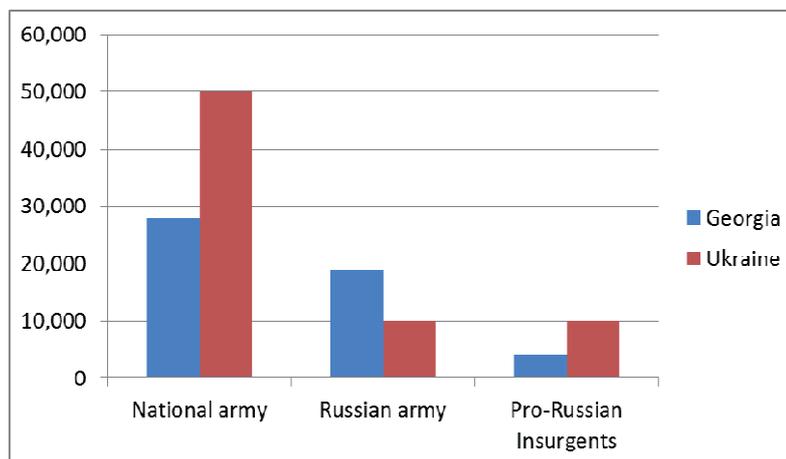


Figure 4. Comparison of strength of armed conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) by total number of soldiers involved

Sources: Report. Volume I' (2009). *IIFFMCG, September*. <http://web.archive.org/web/20091007030130/http://www.ceiig.ch/pdf/IIFFMCG_Volume_I.pdf>; Report. Volume II (2009). *IIFFMCG, September* <http://web.archive.org/web/20110706223037/http://www.ceiig.ch/pdf/IIFFMCG_Volume_II.pdf>; Report. Volume III (2009). *IIFFMCG*. <http://web.archive.org/web/20110706223252/http://www.ceiig.ch/pdf/IIFFMCG_Volume_III.pdf>; Barabanov, M. (2009). The August War Between Russia And Georgia. *Moscow Defense Brief, 1*, 15. <<http://www.webcitation.org/5fm4fGQ5j>>; NATO estimates Russia has 10,000-12,000 troops near Ukraine border (2014). *Reuters, July 14*. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/14/us-ukraine-crisis-nato-idUSKBN0FJ1HX20140714>>; PM Yatseniuk: Some 50,000 military participate in ATO (2014). *Ukrinform, August 11*; <http://www.ukrinform.ua/eng/news/pm_yatseniuk_some_50000_military_participate_in_ato_325180>; Foster, H., Goryachova, T. (2014). Ukraine's Next Battle Is Donetsk, But No Bombs, Please. *USA Today, July 12*. <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/07/12/ukraine-donetsk-separatists/12506719/>>.

Another factor which provides evidence in favor of geopolitical character of incentives of Russo-Georgian war is the fact that the conflicts in the disputed areas (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) from the beginning of 1990s till 2008 were "frozen", thus, making these particular region a suitable target for any

¹ Similar link between the Russians' perceptions of economic perceptions and approval of Putin were found by Daniel Treisman (2014).

² Q&A: Conflict in Georgia (2008). *BBC News, 11 November*. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7549736.stm>>.

revisionary infringements of the Russian Federation. Thus, conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia had historical background, providing the basis for Russian argumentation. What is more important, they were located in strategically important area for Russia, where it sought to reestablish its hegemonic position. Thus, this conflict had geopolitical incentives.

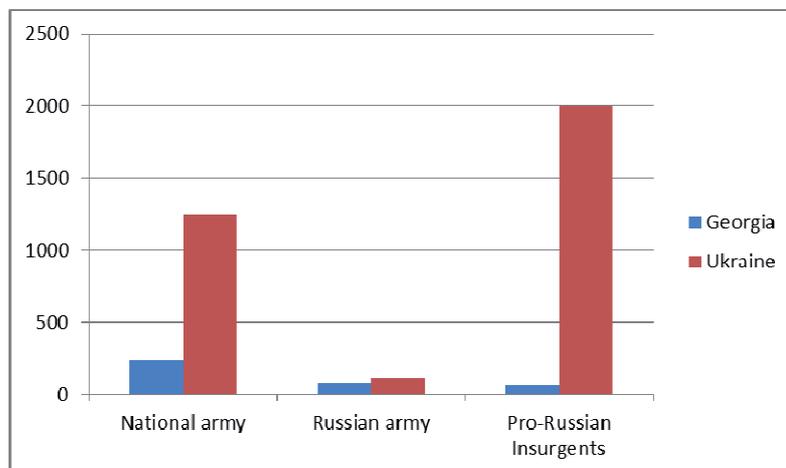


Figure 5. Military Casualties in armed conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014)

Sources: List of Casualties among the Georgian Military Servicemen (2008). *Ministry of Defense of Georgia*. <<http://web.archive.org/web/20120607052439/http://www.mod.gov.ge/index.php?page=-10&Id=31&lang=1>>; List of Casualties of South Ossetia troops in august 2008 (2008). *Regnum, October 20*. <<http://www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/georgia/1071748.html?forprint>>; Russia increases death toll in S. Ossetia conflict to 67 soldiers (2009). *Sputnik News, August 7*. <<http://sputniknews.com/russia/20090807/155750672.html>>; Tsvetkova, M., Grove, T. (2014). For Embattled Ukraine Rebels, No Time To Honor The Death. *Reuters, August 21*. <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/08/21/ukraine-crisis-donetsk-burials-idINKBN0GL1PB20140821>>; Over 1,250 Ukrainian servicemen killed in hostilities in Donbas – Ukrainian president (2014). *Interfax, December 12*. <<http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/238332.html>>; Group "Cargo-200" named the confirmed number of dead Russian soldiers in the Donbas (2014). *Ibforesist, December 13*. <<http://inforesist.org/v-gruppe-gruz-200-nazvali-podtverzhdennyu-cifru-pogibshix-russkix-soldat-v-donbasse/>>

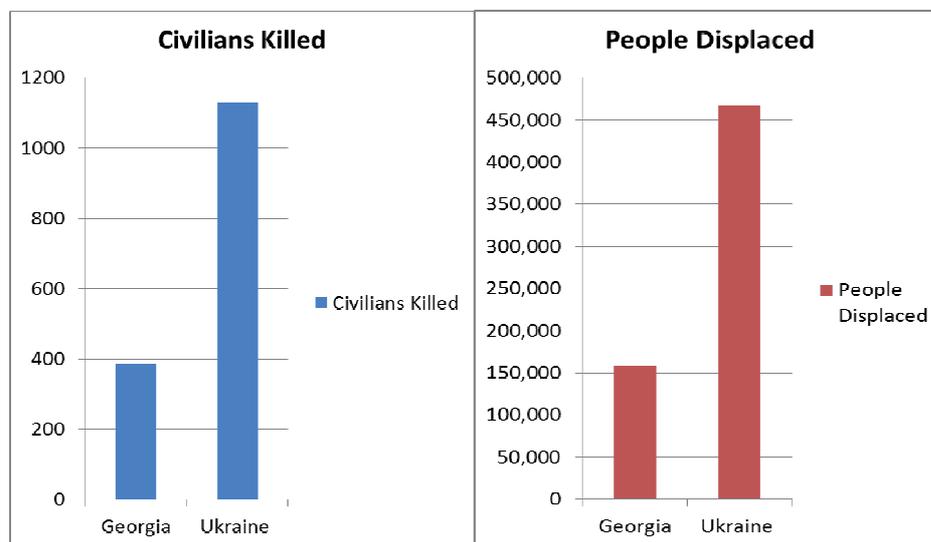


Figure 6. Civilian Casualties and Losses in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014)

Sources: Consequences of Russian Aggression In Georgia (2009). *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia*. <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=597>; Fawkes, H. (2008). Despair Among Georgia's Displaced. *BBC, August 20*. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7572736.stm>>; Ukraine. Situation Report No. 21' (2014). *OCHA, December 12*. <<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sitrep%2021%20-%20Ukraine%20-%202012%20December.pdf>>

On the other hand, in 2014 both economic growth and popularity of the country's leadership were plummeting in Russia. The country experienced considerable economic hardships, which caused the

decreased approval of the president among the mass public. To rise its popularity and to be capable of maintaining regime's status-quo the country's leadership had to divert the public attention from the domestic issues. One of the most effective ways to do that, according to the diversionary theory, was to launch an armed conflict at the Russian frontier, just behind the border. Taking into consideration the development of nationalism in the latest decade in Russia, the best argumentation for it was the persecution of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Thus, the special-temporal observation allows to conclude that the armed conflict in Ukraine was launched by the Russian Federation under the circumstances of domestic challenges to divert the public attention. This diversionary strategy proved to be effective: Putin's approval rate started increasing immediately after the beginning of the conflict, reaching its peak in November, 2014.

The incentives of the Russian government had direct impact on the warfare repertoires chosen in each case. In Georgia Russia was interested in fast achievement of predetermined geopolitical goals (to take over the control in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, to stop Georgia's membership in NATO, to reestablish Russian influence in the region). The operation was conducted by 19,000 Russian troops in just 5 days. This time proved to be enough to achieve the stated geopolitical goals under the conditions of military conflict of high intensity. After impressive military success in Georgia, Russia was ready to sign ceasefire, since it was clear that South Ossetia and Abkhazia will remain within the sphere of direct Russian influence. In addition, short conflict allowed Russia to avoid considerable economic and human losses, thus, making possible to reach the goals on the lowest cost possible.

The opposite developments took place in the Ukrainian case in 2014. The aforementioned economic hardships forced the government to look for ways of diverting public attention from the domestic issues. Donbas (the conflict zone in Eastern Ukraine) historically belonged to Ukraine and was never disputed separately from the rest of the country. After Ukraine acquired its independence in 1991, this area remained an integral part of Ukrainian economy. It had strong representation among Ukrainian political elites and never sought to join Russia. Thus, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine was artificially created, taking advantage of the general instability in the country, caused by the revolution (winter 2013-2014) and recent annexation of Crimea. There were no geopolitical reasons for the launch of armed conflict, since Ukraine historically remained within the sphere of Russian influence and after the revolution (which was pro-European) was too weak to question the balance of power in the region.

Ukraine was a good target for diversionary war in its Eastern region with high concentration of ethnic Russians. Taking into consideration the fact that the nationalist discourse remains the most popular in Russia, it was logical to employ the argumentation of the conflict which was easily understood and accepted by the mass public. The immediate result was the growth of the approval rating of Vladimir Putin and the Russian government in general, which in fact was the major goal of this conflict.

Since it is necessary to divert public attention for a long period of time (economic problems require much time to be solved), military confrontation is conducted on a slow pace and with low intensity. This mode of armed conflict also allows preventing the casualties among Russian military troops which might cause the dissatisfaction among the Russian citizens. In such a way, the Russian government found an effective tool to shift public attention from its poor performance in the long term with minimal economic and human losses.

Based on the aforementioned argument it is possible to make conclusions about the correlation between the governments incentives of launching the armed conflicts and the warfare repertoires. Thus, periods of economic stability and leadership popularity are associated with intense short warfare repertoires, which serve to achieve geopolitical goals. On the other hand, periods of economic stagnation and decrease in leadership popularity are associated with low intensity of warfare repertoires, which play diversionary role within domestic politics.

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Main Economic Indicators, Russian Federation, 2008-2014

Economic indicator	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
GDP, % change	5.2	-7.8	4.5	4.3	3.4	1.3	0.8
Fixed capital investment, %	9.5	-13.5	6.3	10.8	6.8	-0.2	-3
Inflation (CPI), % change	14.1	11.7	6.9	8.5	5.1	6.8	6.5
Unemployment, %	6.3	8.4	7.3	6.5	5.5	5.5	5.64
Nominal exchange rate, Rb/USD	24.8	31.7	30.4	29.4	31.1	31.8	36.1
Reserve Fund, bln USD	137.1	60.5	25.4	25.2	62.1	87.4	87.9
National Wealth Fund, bln USD	88	91.6	88.4	86.8	88.1	88.6	86.5
Reserves (including gold) billion \$	427	439	479	499	538	510	478
Export of goods, billion \$	466.3	297.2	392.7	515.4	528	523.3	349
Import of goods, billion \$	288.7	183.9	245.7	318.6	335.7	343	181.8

Source: 'Russia Economic Report' (2014) The World Bank in the Russian Federation, 32. – P. 54

Freedom Rating of the Russian Federation, 2008, 2014

	2008 Scores	2014 Scores
Status	Not Free	Not Free
Freedom Rating	5.5	5.5
Civil Liberties	5	5
Political Rights	6	6

Source: Freedom rating. Russia (2008). *Freedom House*. <<https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2008/russia>>; Freedom rating. Russia (2014). *Freedom House*. <<https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/russia-0>>.