

**UNIVERSITY OF PUBLIC SERVICE**  
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**Author's Summary**

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**The Effect of the 2008 Russian-Georgian War on  
European Security**

PhD dissertation

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## **Conceptualization of the scientific problem**

The unexpected 2008 Russian-Georgian war shed light on the hidden ethnical conflicts of the post-Soviet area and the great powers' ongoing geopolitical game for the supremacy in the region. Researching the conflict as a case study provides an excellent opportunity for the examination of a longer, both local and international process which influences the security of Eastern Europe and the whole European continent.

As a result of the 2008 war, the European security system based on multilateral cooperation and international organizations (UN, OSCE, Council of Europe) was weakened and the power politics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century come into the limelight. The Russian Federation almost reached all of its political goals with the war, South Ossetia and Abkhazia – contrary to international law – gained *de facto* independence under Russian patronage (albeit it was recognized only by a handful of smaller and less significant states besides Russia). Georgia's EU and NATO integration process was halted according to Russia's interests and Moscow successfully escaped any significant international sanctions. Last but not least, the Russian armed forces proved that they were able to conduct a rapid and successful military operation in the post-Soviet area. Perhaps the only objective that Moscow failed to reach during the war was Mihail Saakashvili's removal from power.

The war was a milestone in a process in which the economically, politically and militarily strengthened Russia – under the rule of President Putin – has intended to regain its great power status based on Russia's hydrocarbon resources. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of Moscow's influence on international affairs during the Yeltsin era, the economic development expanded the room for maneuver both in internal and external affairs, which together with the intention to regain Russia's great power status have caused a more assertive foreign policy.

During the conflict, the European Union had an opportunity to prove its ability to effectively deal with a conflict in its Eastern neighborhood underpinning the necessity of the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), which has gained a stronger character in the last decades. Nevertheless, the intervention of the European Union led to controversial results.

Considering that the 2008 war was promptly taken off the agenda of the most important international actors due to the 2008 financial and economic crisis, President Obama's reset policy toward Moscow and the tight economic links between Western Europe and Russia, it is important to thoroughly examine the effects of the 2008 war on European security, especially since this war is among the less researched conflicts in Hungary.

## Hypotheses

During the research the following hypotheses were set up:

- The Russian-Georgian war cannot be considered as an independent, separate event, but as a part of a geopolitical game aiming at influencing the post-Soviet region.
- The Russian-Georgian war is a result of a complex conflict, which has a local, internal Georgian level (Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia). A regional Russian-Georgian level (including the situation after the first Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian war, the role of Russian peacekeepers in the region and the assertiveness of Russian foreign policy in the near abroad at the beginning of the 2000's). Finally, the conflict has a geopolitical level (an American-Russian or Western-Russian level), which gained momentum after the 2003 Rose revolution and the strengthening of American-Georgian and Georgian-NATO relations.
- Although the 2008 financial and economic crisis distracted the European and Western nations' attention from the importance of the Russian-Georgian conflict, the analysis of the war is of utmost importance in order to understand Russia's current behavior and strengthen Europe's security.
- During the Russian-Georgian conflict and since then, Russia's behavior has been of a realist regional great power and it hasn't shown particular security policy innovation (e.g. citing the Kosovo example in reasoning the intervention in South Ossetia). On the other hand, the European Union and its leading powers acted like liberal great powers during the conflict, thus they didn't have sufficient tools at their disposal in solving the conflict within short term. Their aim was merely to bring the armed conflict to a halt.
- Although Russia is a regional great power with a security policy interest basically covering only the post-Soviet area, its activity in this area significantly influences the whole security of the European continent. The European states and the European international institutions should prepare to tackle this security challenge.

## Objectives

Based on the hypotheses, the dissertation aims to find answers to the following questions:

1. What role did the history of the region and the ethnical tensions of the South Caucasus play in the break out of the 2008 Georgian-Russian war and to what extent was it the result of a geopolitical game played by Russia and the West?
2. The causes and the course of the war.
3. What results did the European Union reach in bringing the war to an end?
4. What institutions is the European security based on and how do they secure the peace of the continent?
5. What effect did the war have on the security perceptions of the most important European states and Europe's real security situation?
6. What political, economic and military answers were given after the war in order to mitigate its consequences? What were the reactions of the Western states and their most important institutions – the EU and NATO – after the war to the changed security situation in the South Caucasus?
7. What effect did the war have on the Russian proposal for reshaping the European security architecture?

It is not an aim of the dissertation to analyze the military aspects of the war or decide which party started the hostilities. The events of August 2008 were a result of a long process and the responsibility cannot be determined by the decisions made before a few days or hours of the break out of the hostilities.

## Methodology

The dissertation is a case study, which aims to examine the ongoing geopolitical game in the post-Soviet area and its effect on the security of Europe through the Russian-Georgian war and its consequences. The case study – through the Russian-Georgian conflict – also aims to shed light on the fact that as a regional great power, Russia follows *Realpolitik* in its foreign and security policy whereas the European Union and the Western European countries mostly apply liberal principles in their foreign policy.

During the research, I mostly used document analysis. As a retrospective method, the document analysis is especially suitable to examine the reasons behind the break out of the

war and the consequences of the conflict. As a part of the research, I studied the relevant Hungarian and foreign literature and documents, using both primary and secondary sources. Studying the documents, I examined the characteristics and the context of the topic and structured the relevant information in order to underpin the hypotheses.

During the research, I participated in several conferences and lectures in connection with the topic of the dissertation, both in Hungary and abroad. On these occasions, I had the possibility to meet researchers, diplomats and politicians dealing with the post-Soviet region.

### **Brief summary of the research by chapters**

In the introduction of the dissertation, I identified the scientific problem, set up the hypotheses and the objectives, determined the methodology of the research and reviewed the relevant Hungarian and foreign literature.

The first chapter briefly introduces the theoretical background of the foreign policy analysis, the historical background of the war, the ethnical conflicts of Georgia, the Russian-Georgian bilateral relations and the geopolitical determination of the South Caucasus. The chapter describes the South Ossetian-Georgian and the Abkhaz-Georgian civil war in the 1990s, as well as the Rose Revolution, which gave impetus to Georgia's Western integration, significantly influencing Russian-Georgian relations. The chapter also deals with the geopolitical conditions of the region, Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet area during the 1990s and 2000s and the geopolitical rivalry between the US and Russia and the role of the EU. Finally, the chapter analyses the relevant strategic documents of the Russian Federation (national security strategy, military doctrine and concept of foreign policy).

The second chapter analyses the reasons lying behind the break out of the war, Moscow's attempts to influence the Georgian internal politics, the preparation of Russia and Georgia to the war, the role of the Russian peacekeepers in Georgia and the region and the results of the Russian passport policy in the breakaway regions of Georgia. The second chapter also deals with the international environment influencing the events in the South Caucasus (e.g. the recognition of the independence of Kosovo) and NATO's controversial policies toward the region (Bucharest NATO summit). Furthermore, the chapter gives a detailed day by day picture of the war (including the cyber and the media war) and the role of the European Union in signing the ceasefire. Finally, the chapter evaluates the direct consequences of the war.

The third chapter gives a brief introduction of international law and institutions securing peace on the European continent and deals with the legal consequences of the Russian

Georgian war, as well as the attempts made by the Russian Federation to reshape the European security architecture after the conflict. The chapter also analyses the relations between Georgia and the most important Western international organizations (NATO, EU) and the effect of the war on these relations. Furthermore, the chapter examines the effect of the war on the security of EU member states and the change in their security perceptions after the war. Finally, the chapter deals with the Georgian foreign and security policy following the war and the impact the conflict made on the ongoing Russian military reform.

At the end of the dissertation, I summarize the scientific results of the research, introduce the new results, set up recommendations and identify possible new fields of research in connection with the topic of the dissertation.

### **Summary of the scientific results**

As a result of my research, the hypotheses of the dissertation were confirmed and the objectives were fulfilled.

In connection with the reasons of the break out of the war, the dissertation identified three significant factors. The first one was the presence of the Georgian internal ethnical tensions rooting in the history of the country and mainly in the civil war of 1990-94. The second factor was the shift in Georgian interior and foreign policy toward a Western orientation, aiming at the integration into NATO and the EU, the democratization of the country and the restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia. This shift played a critical role in Russian-Georgian bilateral relations. The third factor was the geopolitical determination of the South Caucasus. The previous hegemon of the region – Russia – was rolled back from the South Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the 2000s, Russia was strengthened economically by its hydrocarbon riches and politically as well as militarily by the centralized power of the Putin administration, leading to a more assertive foreign policy aiming at the restoration of Russia's influence in its near abroad. The assertive Russian foreign policy and Tbilisi's intention to leave the Russian sphere of influence and join NATO and the EU put the two countries on a collision course.

Meanwhile, the South Caucasus become more important for the US – and to a less extent for the EU – due to its hydrocarbon resources (Georgia is also an important East-West transit corridor for the Caspian oil and gas) and the war on terror. Washington and Brussels provided significant financial and technical help (and American military assistance) to facilitate Tbilisi's Western integration. The wrong assessment of the Georgian administration

on the possible help provided by the US in case of a conflict with Russia also contributed to the escalation of the situation in Georgia.

As it was mentioned above, after President Putin had come to power, the Kremlin started to build an authoritarian, centralized regime (power vertical), which was underpinned by the state's increasing oil and gas revenue. Russia's political and economic transformation resulted in an expansionist foreign policy with tangible results in Russia's near abroad.

Concerning the role Moscow played in Georgia's internal conflicts, I came to the conclusion that it had not been Russia's interest to facilitate the settlement of the South Ossetian and Abkhazian frozen conflicts even before the 2008 war, since maintaining the status quo had provided a great leverage in influencing Georgia's internal and external politics (other unsettled conflicts still provide the same leverage for Moscow in the post-Soviet region).

In order to maintain or increase the influence on Tbilisi, Russia had applied the following measures before the war:

- The Russian peacekeepers didn't play a neutral role in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, rather they were a geopolitical tool in the hands of Moscow.
- Russia carried out a stealth annexation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, de facto partly integrating their administration into Russia's state institutions.
- Moscow provided Russian passport en masse for the South Ossetians and Abkhazians.
- Since 2006, the armed provocations and clashes had been constant between the Georgian and Russian parties, keeping tensions at a high level and increasing the risk of an outright war.
- Before the 2008 war, Russia had made serious military preparations in order to successfully conduct military operations against Georgia.

Besides the above, two other significant international events influenced the break out of the war. The first was the recognition of Kosovo's independence by several Western states, which was perceived in Moscow as a loss of prestige and applied later as a precedent in case of the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The second was the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, where on the one hand Tbilisi was denied to join the Alliance's Membership Action Plan (MAP) – considered as the antechamber of membership – due to the internal divisions of NATO, on the other hand the Alliance guaranteed that Georgia

would become the member of NATO one day. Since NATO's expansion to the post-Soviet area has been considered as a security threat by Russia (which can be recognized in the strategic documents of the country), Moscow interpreted the decision made by NATO in Bucharest as a temporary break in Georgia's NATO integration path, leaving a window of opportunity for Russia to prevent Georgia joining NATO once and for all. These events have underpinned the hypothesis of the dissertation that the Georgian-Russian war was a part of a geopolitical game aiming at influencing the post-Soviet region.

In 2008, Russia achieved clear military victory, although the Russian military forces had several serious shortcomings (e.g. the air force suffered heavy losses during the war). The lessons learnt from the war have been utilized by the Russian military leadership in the reform of the defense sector, aiming at rapid force projection in Russia's near abroad. With the war, Moscow reached its political goals. Georgia's Western integration was halted, Russia's position in the region was strengthened, the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were recognized (even if only a handful of states followed the Russian example). Furthermore, Moscow managed to normalize its relations with the West within a short time. Only one political goal was not achieved, Saakashvili's removal from power.

The French EU presidency had a crucial role in signing the ceasefire, which was considered as a significant European success. At the same time, the imprecise text of the ceasefire agreement – according to Russia's interest – allowed the continuous presence of the Russian troops on Georgian territory. Furthermore, Russia has violated the ceasefire agreement several times and didn't withdraw its forces to the positions held before the hostilities.

Regarding the international law aspects of the war, the conclusion can be drawn that Georgia violated international law by attacking Tskhinvali, but the Russian reaction was disproportional and went beyond self-defense, thus Moscow also violated international law. The necessity of a "humanitarian intervention" – raised by Moscow as a reason for Russian interference – cannot be verified. Before the war, Russia illegally provided Russian passports to tens of thousands of South Ossetians and Abkhazians, justifying a military intervention by the interest of these "new citizens" is against international law. Georgia's actions qualified as justified self-defense based on Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations after the Russian military operations had extended through the administrative borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is in contradiction to international law, the case of Kosovo cannot be applied as a precedent. Finally, Tbilisi has the right – guaranteed by the Helsinki Final Act, the Charter of Paris and



the 1999 Charter for European Security – to choose or change its security arrangements and treaties of alliance, thus Russia’s wish to influence the Western integration path of post-Soviet countries contradicts international law.

The examination of international law in connection with the war and the role played by the French EU Presidency in halting the hostilities underpinned the hypothesis that Russia acted as a realist great power in pursuing its interests – it didn’t take into consideration the norms of international law – while the European Union and its member states put emphasis on international cooperation and acted as liberal great powers, thus they didn’t have efficient tools to solve the conflict.

After the war, Russia has continued to push its proposal directed to reshape the European security architecture with a renewed impetus based on the perception that NATO is a major threat to Russia. The proposal aimed to marginalize NATO’s role on the continent. Despite Russian efforts, the proposal aimed at the fundamental reformation of the European security system has met with refusal from Western leaders.

In connection with NATO and EU policies toward Georgia and the post-Soviet region after the war, the conclusion can be drawn that both organizations have supported Georgia in several ways and paid greater attention to the region. Although new institutional structures were set up (NATO-Georgia Commission, Eastern Partnership, etc.), the results of the 2008 financial and economic crisis, the enlargement fatigue and the blossoming economic relations between several Western countries and Russia have harmed the integration perspectives of Georgia and the post-Soviet states. In the foreseeable future, NATO and the EU will be divided in the further Eastern enlargement. The division among member states has been strengthened by the Russian-Georgian war, reinforcing those opinions according to which the region is not ready for membership. Russia’s indirect influence – applied by the destabilization of the region – has remained intact regarding Eastern enlargement. Finally, the dragging EU and NATO integration process hurts the credibility of the two organizations in the post-Soviet area. While the various cooperation forms and programs – substituting the real integration – generate high expectations in the region, the West cannot meet these expectations due to the lack of allocation of sufficient financial instruments and the exclusion of membership perspective.

Concerning the effect of the war on the relationship between Western institutions and Russia, I came to the conclusion that the EU and NATO member states were divided regarding the desirable policy toward Russia after the war, therefore they were not able to efficiently vindicate their interest. The war has had a modest effect on the most of EU and

NATO member states' security perception. The Baltic countries and Poland were most concerned, they initiated the enhancement of NATO's collective defense based on the Article 5 of North Atlantic Treaty. While several East Central European states suggested harder approach toward Russia, other countries – most importantly France, Germany and Italy – were interested in the complete and fast restoration of their relations with Russia according to their political and economic interests. Since the latter group was more influential and the Obama administration introduced its reset policy toward Russia, the relations between the West and the Russian Federation were normalized within a short term and economic sanctions were not introduced. As it was mentioned above, the fast normalization was also due to the effects of the financial and economic crisis, the enlargement fatigue and the general unconcern toward the post-Soviet area.

As a result of the war and the American presidential elections, the Saakashvili administration became isolated. Tbilisi was able to correct its foreign policy only after the 2012-2013 parliamentary and presidential elections. The new government set a new political goal, the normalization of Russian-Georgian bilateral relations, besides pursuing Western integration. At the same time, the détente with Russia has had its limits due to the rigid Russian standpoint regarding Georgia's secessionist regions (just like in the Sevardnadze era) and the deteriorating Western-Russian relations because of the Ukrainian crisis.

The 2008 Russian-Georgian war – as I concluded in the dissertation – has had perceptible effect on the European security, mainly in the Russian near abroad extending from Central Asia to the Baltic states. The understanding of the political developments in the post-Soviet area has been hampered by the fact that while Russia conducts *Realpolitik* in Eastern Europe (with zero sum games), the Western countries – especially Germany due to the historical development of the country after World War II – conduct a foreign policy based on international cooperation and institutions, international law and the refusal of the use of force or threatening of force (liberal and neoliberal ideas). The different perception of international relations hampers the mutual understanding and the successful handling of conflicts. Moscow considers NATO's and the EU's Eastern enlargement as a major threat. The Eastern Partnership, the Association Agreements and the potential establishment of a free trade zone including Western and Eastern Europe are considered as an interference in Russia's sphere of influence and the adversary of the Eurasian Union, thus Moscow intends to stop the advance of these integration forms. Whether Russia is able to halt the Western integration is determined by its political, economic and military resources. Regarding these resources, I drew the conclusion that while at the beginning of the 2000s Russia had been able to increase

its economic, political and military strength due to the oil and gas revenue, at the beginning of the next decade the potential of this economic model was drained. Russia has misused its increasing hydrocarbon revenue, failed to modernize its economy, faced a negative demographic trend, chose its allies controversially – Moscow’s Asian ally, China is in fact its rival – and most of the post-Soviet countries have favored the Western integration instead of the Russian political model if they had the possibility to choose. Forcing states into Russia’s orbit can yield a result in a short term, but in the long term Moscow is not able to effectively control the post-Soviet area by force. Using military force in the first place also signals the few tools at Russia’s disposal in enforcing its interests (using military means in the first place sheds light on the lack of other means). The Russian foreign and security policy practiced in Russia’s near abroad is contra productive, it destabilizes the region causing significant political and economic damage to Russia itself. The unfolding events in Ukraine in 2013 and 2014 have unexpectedly underpinned the importance of the Russian-Georgian war, putting it in a wider perspective and giving the chance to study the 2008 events as a part of an ongoing geopolitical process.

### **New scientific results**

The hypotheses set up at the beginning of the research were confirmed and as a new scientific result it was proven that the Russian-Georgian war is a result of a complex conflict, which has a local Georgian level – based on ethnical divisions – a regional Russian-Georgian level and a geopolitical level, involving great powers. Regarding the geopolitical level, I came to the conclusion that the conflict cannot be considered as an independent event, it was a part of the ongoing geopolitical game in the post-Soviet region, therefore understanding the reasons and the results of the 2008 war is of utmost importance in order to understand Russia’s current behavior and strengthen the security of the European continent.

It was also proven that – using the war as a case study – Russia’s foreign and security policy implemented in the post-Soviet area has had a significant effect on the security of the whole continent, therefore the European states and the European international institutions should prepare to give adequate answers to this foreign and security policy.

As a result of my research, I came to the conclusion that Russia has conducted a realist foreign and security policy, thought of zero sum games and preferred the use of military force. On the contrary, European Union and its member states have conducted liberal foreign policy, putting emphasis on the international law and institutions and refusing the use of force and the threat of the use of force as a foreign policy tool. Due to this contradiction, the parties often

misunderstood each other. Furthermore, the EU hasn't had sufficient tools at its disposal in solving military conflicts and it has been reluctant to use even those few tools it possessed.

As a new scientific result it was proven that the 2008 war has had perceptible effect on European security, even if it hardly influenced the security perception of several European countries.

## **Recommendations**

### **NATO**

1. The decision on Georgia's NATO membership hasn't been made for a long time due to the internal division of the Alliance. Even if the decision will not be made in the foreseeable future, NATO should allow Georgia to participate in the Membership Action Plan.
2. In order to enhance genuine deterrence, NATO should put more emphasis on the collective defense based on Article 5 and increase its military presence in the Baltic States according to the obligation made at the NATO summit in Wales or even extending them.
3. In order to support the military reform in the post-Soviet countries – chiefly in Ukraine and Georgia –, it is necessary to increase the financial and material support, as well as the knowledge transfer, which contrary to the earlier practice should put more emphasis on the classic area defense instead of the anti-terrorism and counter-insurgency warfare.

### **European Union**

1. The 2008 war – and later the crisis in Ukraine – has proved that the conflict prevention capabilities of the EU are weak. These capabilities should be strengthened.
2. In order to make the Eastern Partnership more tangible – and help the democratic development of the post-Soviet area –, it is necessary to allocate more financial resources for the program. Furthermore, it is necessary to provide real enlargement perspective for those states – Moldova and Georgia –, which have been leading the integration process.

3. EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia has contributed to the stability of Georgia to a great extent, therefore it is necessary to extend its working in the next years.
4. It is important to realize that the EU's Eastern expansion has met strong resistance in Moscow. It is of utmost importance to recognize and counter Russia's measures aiming at hindering EU policies in the region in time.

### **Georgia**

1. Georgia should continue the democratic and economic reform. Regarding the restoration of the territorial integrity of the country, it is only possible if Georgia is able to maintain democratic and economic development in the long term, making the country attractive for reintegration.
2. Russia is a major actor in the South Caucasus both in terms of politics and military, therefore Tbilisi should maintain good relations with Moscow.
3. Georgia should also aim to improve its relations with the secessionist regions, accepting the fact that their reintegration is not possible in short or medium term.

### **Applicability and further research opportunities**

The dissertation contributes to the better understanding of the political processes of Georgia and the post-Soviet region and to a more accurate identification of Hungary's foreign and security policy interests.

Also, the dissertation provides useful information in assessing the security challenges and threats Hungary faces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in giving adequate answers to them.

Finally, the research laid down in the dissertation can be useful for experts dealing with foreign and security policy of the post-Soviet area, the EU and NATO. Also, it can be a foundation for further research and it can be used in civilian and military higher education.

Further research areas can be:

- The effects of the war on the post-Soviet region.
- The similarities and differences of the Russian-Georgian war and the Ukrainian crisis.
- The comprehensive research of the political and economic relationship between specific EU member states and Russia and the countries of the South Caucasus, and the effects of these relations on EU policies.

- The similarities and differences of the unsettled conflicts in the post-Soviet area. The comprehensive research of Russia's leverage it practices through these conflicts on the countries in the region.
- The research of the various tools Russia has been using in pursuing its interests in its near abroad, especially regarding the differences between the direct military means used in Georgia and the indirect means used in Ukraine.

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## Curriculum Vitae

**First name/Surname:** Károly Benes  
**Place/Date of birth:** Budapest, 1975.

### Work experience

- 2015- First Secretary (Commercial Attaché), Deputy Consul  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Embassy of Hungary in Lebanon, Beirut  
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- 2012-2015 University of Public Service, Doctoral School of Military Sciences,  
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