

# Five Lessons from the Five-Day War

**I**n August 2025, Georgia remembers the five-day war of August 2008. This tragic historical occurrence did not just reshape Georgia in the subsequent years but also laid the groundwork for Russia's further aggression against Ukraine and wider European security. The invasion of Russia, in hindsight, in conjunction with its military actions in Ukraine over the last decade, offers valuable lessons which must be internalized not only by Georgians, Ukrainians, and other nations, neighboring Russia, but by the European and Euro-Atlantic partners who have invested heavily in the European security order and a peaceful continent. In this article, I offer five main lessons that we can draw from the five-day war.

## Lesson One: Russia Manufactures War and Blames Its Victims

A major lesson from Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 is that Russia does not just stumble into wars. It scripts them with legal arguments, military theater, and preplanned provocations designed not only to justify aggression but to dis-

tort the very definition of it. Long before the first missile lands or the first soldier, a mercenary, or a "little green man" crosses a border, Moscow has already deployed its most critical weapon - the narrative.

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In Georgia in 2008, that narrative was dressed in humanitarian camouflage. Russia [claimed](#) it was "protecting its citizens" in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia — citizens it had manufactured over the years of illegal passport distribution. The Kremlin had spent years building the scaffolding for intervention from "peacekeepers" who failed to keep peace, to separatist provocations staged for effect, to Russian media stoking [claims](#) of Georgian "genocide" just days before the assault. By



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the time the Georgian side responded militarily in Tskhinvali, the pretext was ready.

The same template replayed in Ukraine, just on a grander stage. In Crimea, Moscow conjured a narrative of imminent ethnic repression after the Revolution of Dignity and then used it to smuggle troops past the global radar and declare a referendum at gunpoint. In Donbas, it invented a civil war it was secretly orchestrating and claimed to be a neutral party “supporting the will of the people.” By 2022, the fiction had metastasized: Ukraine, the Kremlin claimed, was committing genocide, plotting nuclear weapons, and morphing into a NATO attack dog. The invasion that followed was framed as pre-emptive self-defense — complete with references to [Article 51 of the UN Charter](#) and a grotesque campaign to “de-nazify” a democratic nation led by a Jewish president.

Russia wraps its wars in the language of law and

morality, not to convince everyone, but to convince enough—or confuse enough—to create hesitation, delay a response, or fracture consensus.

Ukraine, by now, is well aware of this. Since 2014, Kyiv has come to understand that narrative defense is a strategic defense. From the moment Crimea was seized, Ukraine went on the offensive — diplomatically, legally, and informationally. It denied the fake humanitarian rationale and exposed Russian troop movements. It framed the war as what it was: a naked violation of the UN Charter and a threat to European security. By the time Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine was answering propaganda in real time — with digital diplomacy, viral messaging, battlefield authenticity, and a unified international campaign. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke not only to the parliaments but to the public. Ukraine learned to preempt the *casus belli*, not merely react to it.

Georgia in 2008 was not so fortunate. Tbilisi responded, but not quickly enough, comprehensively enough, or with the kind of strategic communications machine that modern war demands. And it was a different time, too – social media was in the inception phase, and the iPhone came out just a year earlier. Western media, largely unprepared for the speed of the disinformation blitz, reached for the lazy fallback – “both sides.” Even the [Tagliavini Report](#), commissioned by the EU, while acknowledging Russia’s disproportionate force and illegal occupation, still “blamed” Georgia for the escalation (not “starting of war,” as the GD leaders currently irresponsibly claim). For Moscow, it was a rhetorical win. Nevertheless, Georgia in 2008 and subsequent years managed to turn the international opinion, through global media outreach, active diplomacy, constant efforts to keep the issue of occupation on the international agenda, and never giving up the main message – Russia is a threat not only to Georgia, but to Ukraine, the Baltic states, and wider European security.

***When the victim echoes the aggressor’s talking points, the war is not just lost on the battlefield. It is lost in memory.***

And yet, the story of Georgia’s narrative struggle did not end in 2008. It is being rewritten now, in 2025 – from within. Under the current ruling Georgian Dream regime, the very record of Russia’s aggression is being softened, reframed, and reversed. The so-called *Tsulukiani Commission* has pushed a revisionist line that [blames](#) Georgia’s leaders – namely, Mikheil Saakashvili, and by extension, Georgia – for starting the 2008 war. The aim is clear – to discredit the previous pro-Western administration and, its transatlantic partners. But it also serves a second, more insidious purpose: aligning Georgia’s internal discourse with Russia’s external narrative. When the victim echoes the aggressor’s talking points, the war is not just lost on the battlefield. It is lost in memory.

If there is a single lesson from Georgia’s 2008 war and Ukraine’s current one, it is this: countering Russia’s war begins with countering its narrative. Waiting for the facts to settle means losing the ground before the fight begins.

## Lesson Two: Moscow Turns International Institutions into Instruments of Impunity

For all its tanks, warplanes, and operatives, one of Russia’s most effective weapons remains a negotiation table. Not the kind where peace is made – but the kind where peace is stalled, where responsibility is obscured, and where aggression is recast as diplomacy. Over the past two decades, Moscow has mastered the art of using the very institutions meant to constrain it – the OSCE and the United Nations – to legitimize its advances and delay any meaningful response. In Georgia and Ukraine, the results have been grim.

The OSCE, born of the Helsinki spirit and clothed in the vocabulary of cooperation and transparency, was once the West’s favorite instrument of soft deterrence. Today, as in 2008, it is Russia’s perfect diplomatic smokescreen. When the 2008 war in Georgia loomed, the OSCE was already present in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia – technically. Its monitors, all five of them (!), were there, but their access was restricted beyond a 15-kilometer zone from the center of Tskhinvali. Moscow’s objections froze their mandate. They could not verify Russian military buildups, nor could they respond to provocations staged by separatist forces. After the war, Russia refused to acknowledge Georgia’s territorial integrity in OSCE documents and insisted on treating Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia as independent states. The [result](#) was that the OSCE folded its mission, retreated, and has never returned.

In Ukraine, Russia repeated the play – this time

with the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM), which operated in Donbas from 2014 to 2022. The mission, which was celebrated in 2014 as a second life for the OSCE, was constantly harassed, denied access to key areas, and blindfolded from observing cross-border arms flows. Then, just as Russia launched its full-scale invasion, it pulled the plug. Russia vetoed the extension of the SMM's mandate, effectively ejecting the OSCE from Ukraine — and with it, the last set of neutral eyes on the ground. In both conflicts, the pattern was the same: first deny observers the tools to act, then accuse them of being biased or ineffective, and finally eliminate them.

Yet, Russia does not want the OSCE abolished. On the contrary, it defends the organization — because it works exactly as Moscow needs it to. The OSCE's consensus-based model ensures that Russia, as a participating state, can veto any mandate, any language, any budget, any action. It allows Moscow to promote alternative narratives while appearing to engage in “constructive dialogue.” And it ensures that every discussion — about war, occupation, or aggression — can be reframed as a dispute, an internal matter, or an unfortunate misunderstanding wrapped in the language of “constructive ambiguity.”

The UN offers a similar story, only on a grander stage. The institution created to prevent wars of aggression has been paralyzed precisely because it gives the aggressor a seat at the table — and a veto in its most powerful chamber. In 2008, as Russian forces advanced into Georgia, the UN Security Council could not even issue a statement. Russia blocked every draft, every call for withdrawal, every mention of its own culpability. In 2009, it went further, [vetoing](#) the renewal of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) unless Abkhazia was recognized as an independent country. The UN mission vanished. Georgia's attempts to instigate the peacekeeping mission under the General

Assembly's aegis — the so-called United for Peace framework — were not supported by the Western allies, afraid to impose a peacekeeping mission in a hostile environment, opposed by Russia.

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In Ukraine, the theater has been more grotesque. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, and the UN Security Council could do nothing. Russia launched a war in Donbas — the Council did nothing. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine outright, and while the General Assembly passed symbolic resolutions, the Security Council once again collapsed under Moscow's expected veto. Russia even chaired the Security Council while occupying territory in two member states. The arsonist was not just holding the fire hose. He was also moderating the debate on fire safety. This is why Russia continues to invest in these institutions. Not because it believes in multilateralism but because the appearance of multilateralism provides cover for unilateral action.

Ukraine has learned this lesson. It still speaks at the UN — but no longer expects it to act. Instead, Kyiv has shifted its energy to institutions that cannot be vetoed: the UN General Assembly, where Russia is outvoted; international courts, where violations can at least be documented and named, and Western alliances, where real decisions are made. Ukraine treats the Security Council not as a venue for resolution but as a platform to expose obstruction.

Georgia once tried this, too. However, under the Georgian Dream, that impulse has waned. Tbilisi no longer demands the return of the UN and OSCE missions. It rarely raises the issue of Russia's OSCE sabotage. Instead, it entertains the fiction that di-



alogue with Moscow — or neutrality in the face of occupation — will somehow yield better results.

## Lesson Three: Only Force, Not Hesitation, Stops Russia

If there is one thing Russia understands better than the West, it is the value of time, that critical window between the first violation and the first consequence. Moscow has learned to exploit that gap with ruthless precision. And what makes it possible is not strength or strategy alone but something far more predictable — the West's reluctance to engage.

***Russia does not fear diplomacy. It only fears force.***

Caution is embedded in the political DNA of Western democracies — the instinct to avoid escalation, to exhaust all diplomatic avenues, to seek consensus. But Russia does not fear diplomacy. It only fears force. And for years, the West's attempts to de-escalate crises with Moscow have, ironically, created the very conditions in which aggression flourished.

In Georgia, this hesitancy played out in real time. By the summer of 2008, all the warning signs were flashing — a militarized “peacekeeping” force, rampant passportization, provocations across the boundary lines, and a creeping Russian build-up masked as humanitarian engagement. Russia even [flew](#) the fighter jets over Georgia when the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was visiting the country. And yet, the conflict was framed mainly by Western capitals as a frozen dispute, one best managed through cautious observation and dialogue with the predator. When war finally erupted, the EU scrambled to negotiate a ceasefire, not to reverse the aggression but to freeze it. No deterrence preceded the invasion. No punishment fol-

lowed it. Russia paid no price for invading Georgia — and reaped every reward.

The lesson was internalized in Moscow: as long as the West fears provocation, it will not prevent it. That insight became part of Russia's military doctrine.

When Russia moved on Ukraine in 2014, the pattern held. Crimea was seized with astonishing speed. Donbas was set ablaze under the fiction of local insurgency. The response in the form of sanctions was modest and delayed. Military assistance to Kyiv trickled in, hedged by legal restrictions and fears of “sending the wrong signal.” The [Minsk Protocol](#) and [Minsk II Agreement](#) — billed as peace initiatives — in practice institutionalized Russian leverage over Ukraine's political system. Moscow was treated as a mediator, not an arsonist. From 2015 to 2021, Western support for Ukraine was characterized as reactive, incremental, and cautious. And Russia kept watching — concluding, accurately, that there was no appetite in the West for confrontation, in turn growing its appetite for full-scale aggression.

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In Georgia, this failure of deterrence nearly proved fatal. As Russian tanks approached Tbilisi in August 2008, the Georgian military was overwhelmed, the international community paralyzed, and the country braced for collapse. The ceasefire negotiated by Nicolas Sarkozy did not stop the advance — it merely formalized the status quo after Russia had already achieved its objectives. But what actually

made Moscow stop was not a signature — it was a signal from the USA.

When U.S. cargo planes landed at Tbilisi International Airport, delivering humanitarian aid in full view of Russian intelligence, the message was unmistakable. When President George W. Bush, with the Defense Secretary by his side, [announced](#) that U.S. Navy vessels were heading to the Black Sea, even under the guise of non-military support, the effect was immediate. Russia stopped short of Tbilisi. Its forces, which had already reached western Georgia, pulled back. The advance was halted not only by diplomacy but also by deterrence, fear of the unknown, and the risk of escalation with the United States.

This is the only pattern that matters. Russia backs down only when it risks losing — militarily, politically, reputationally. Not when it is reasoned with, but when it is forced to reassess the cost of proceeding. In Ukraine, that pattern repeated itself. Russian forces retreated from Kyiv once the city stood strong and political leadership did not flee (much like in Georgia in 2008). They abandoned Kharkiv when Ukrainian counterattacks broke their supply lines. They left Kherson when logistics collapsed. They stopped advancing when they met with Western defensive and offensive weapons.

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For too long, Western policy has been guided by the illusion that moderation can buy stability. That showing caution, withholding weapons, or softening statements can somehow “manage” Russia. But Moscow never saw moderation as wisdom. It sees it as space. Every pause, every diplomatic nicety, is an invitation to move further. And every inch unchallenged becomes a mile entrenched.

## Lesson Four: Ceasefires Are Paper Shields

There is a persistent delusion that haunts Western diplomacy: the belief that a signature on paper can restrain a regime that rules by force and that treaties bind the Kremlin. But in Russia’s strategic playbook, agreements are not obligations — they are tactics and intermissions, strategically timed and cynically abused.

We have seen this script before. In Georgia, in 2008, the [six-point ceasefire agreement](#) — brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and touted as a triumph of diplomacy — was dead on arrival. It called for Russian forces to withdraw to pre-conflict positions, for humanitarian access, and for an international dialogue and the return of the displaced persons. Even before the ink dried, Russian troops were digging in rather than pulling out. New bases appeared in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Ethnic cleansing continued beneath the euphemism of “stabilization.” And in a final act of defiance, Moscow recognized both territories as “independent states,” gutting the agreement.

Ukraine followed the same logic. In 2014 and again in 2015, the Minsk Agreements — negotiated under the auspices of the OSCE with Russia seated at the table not as an aggressor but as a so-called “mediator” — were welcomed as a diplomatic breakthrough. In reality, they were structurally rigged. Russia refused to be acknowledged as a party to the conflict. The terms demanded political concessions from Ukraine before the restoration of territorial control. Ceasefire violations occurred daily — almost exclusively by Russia and its proxies — and went unpunished.

Then came 2022. And with it, the illusion shattered. Moscow tore through the remnants of Minsk as casually as it had signed them. Another full-scale invasion. Another offer to “negotiate” in Istanbul in

2022. Another attempt to use talks not as a solution but as a tactic — to stall Ukrainian advances, split the West, and test who still clung to the myth that Russia can be reasoned with.

Treaties, to the Kremlin, are only useful so long as they serve a tactical advantage. Once that utility expires, they are violated, reinterpreted, or tossed aside — with zero regard for precedent or legality. [The Budapest Memorandum of 1994](#), which guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty in exchange for surrendering its nuclear arsenal, was torn to shreds when Crimea was seized, just like the Medvedev-Sarkozy-Saakashvili agreement was never implemented.

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In Georgia, the historical memory of this betrayal is now being erased from within. The Georgian Dream, far from demanding implementation of the 2008 ceasefire, now downplays its violations. Its narrative subtly shifts the blame back to Georgia itself — as if the war was provoked, as if the West was a puppet master who pushed Saakashvili into war. In doing so, they not only echo Moscow's talking points but strip Georgia of its legal and moral defense. This is not just a revisionism of the past but a strategic self-disarmament.

## Lesson Five: Georgia was the First Battlefield in Russia's War on Europe's Security Order

Every war Moscow wages is a confrontation with the idea of Europe - whole and free. From Stalin's redrawing of postwar borders to Putin's invasion

of Ukraine, the objective has remained remarkably consistent: to assert control over Europe's security architecture by demanding a veto over the choices of others.

In the early Cold War, Stalin's vision was enforced with tanks and ultimatums. A cordon of satellite states buffered Moscow from the West, their sovereignty neutralized by ideological allegiance and military coercion. The Warsaw Pact was not a defensive alliance but a mechanism of control. When Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 moved toward autonomy, Soviet troops crushed the deviation. [The Brezhnev Doctrine](#) codified the rules: no state behind the Iron Curtain was allowed to chart its own path.

Even when détente introduced new diplomatic languages, the fundamentals did not shift. Brezhnev's participation in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act was strategic, not ideological. The Soviets aimed to lock in recognition of postwar borders and legitimize their hold over Eastern Europe. The West, meanwhile, focused on the Act's human rights provisions, using them to probe Soviet vulnerabilities. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) did not reconcile the two visions — it suspended the conflict under the illusion of balance.

Mikhail Gorbachev's "Common European Home" rhetoric embraced cooperation and soft security, even allowing for the unification of Germany and the inclusion of human rights in security dialogue. But the underlying logic still centered on Russia. NATO, in this vision, would gradually become obsolete. Security would be managed through new collective structures that embedded Moscow at the core. The Soviet Union might share the house — but it would still write the rules.

[The 1990 Charter of Paris](#), signed just before the USSR collapsed, marked a high point of hope. It gave birth to the OSCE and laid out principles of voluntary alliances, inviolable borders, and peace-

ful change. But that moment was brief. Under Boris Yeltsin, as NATO expanded and the EU deepened, the Kremlin recoiled. Russia's integrationist overtures — led by Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev — were not rewarded with the veto Moscow expected. And when it became clear that the post-Cold War order would not grant Russia co-equal authority (just a NATO-Russia Council), the strategy pivoted. Partnership gave way to resentment, which drove Putin's ambitions to revamp the European security order at the earliest convenience.

By 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia, the old doctrine had returned — modernized, but familiar. Medvedev's proposed European Security Treaty (EST) cloaked Russia's ambition in the language of multilateralism and indivisible security. In substance, it was a Brezhnev Doctrine 2.0: a demand for NATO to seek Moscow's permission on every decision and to freeze expansion at Russia's convenience. Most European states saw it for what it was — a well-known old bid for institutional veto. That is why the EST was declined by the European powers and the discussions were thrown down the OSCE's no-consensus drain in the form of the Corfu Process.

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The West's weak and fragmented response to the August 2008 war confirmed what Moscow needed to know. The rules-based order could be bent. Encouraged by passivity, the Kremlin advanced. Crimea fell in 2014. Donbas became a slow-burning war zone. And by 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, preceded by a list of demands that amounted to rewriting Europe's post-Cold War history: no NATO in Ukraine or Georgia, a rollback

of forces in Eastern Europe, and an end to Western influence in Russia's "near abroad." These were not negotiation terms. They were ultimatums.

The Kremlin has never hidden its true objective. It seeks to replace Europe's pluralistic security community — based on voluntary alliances, legal predictability, and peaceful change — with a geopolitical order of hierarchy and veto. In this order, countries like Georgia and Ukraine may have flags and governments, but not agency. Sovereignty is conditional, and independence must be cleared with Moscow. This is why has pushed in various international forums Western acquiescence to the principle that "no state should expand its security at the expense of the other" — an euphemism for a veto on European security matters.

Russia's wars, therefore, are not episodic, but systemic. The Kremlin seeks to fracture the postwar European project — not through brute force alone but by dismantling the foundations of mutual trust, voluntary integration, and shared norms. What it demands is a new security architecture with a restoration of imperial privilege.

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Therefore, the fight of the Georgian people and the fight of the Ukrainian army for their nations' independence, sovereignty, and European future are the same fights. The longer the West treats Georgia and Ukraine as separate crises, the deeper the cracks will grow. These are not isolated aggressions. They are chapters in the same campaign — a hundred-year struggle against the idea of a Europe unbound by Russian veto ■