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# The rise of the Putin Doctrine

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As the West celebrated `soft` power, Putin went back to `hard` power, using gas to cow his neighbors.

True, Georgia`s Mikheil Saakashvili is not a very smart president. A pro would not have walked into the trap the Russians and their local thug-in-chief (a.k.a. "president"), Eduard Kokoity, had set up in South Ossetia. A wise leader would have done some elementary intelligence work and then recoiled in horror. Across the border in (Russian) North Ossetia lay waiting Russia`s 58th Army, steeled by annihilationist warfare in Chechnya and considered their best trained. It has 600 tanks, 2,000 armored troop carriers and 120 combat planes. Even if only half smart, the president could have saved his country from disaster by simply closing the Roki Tunnel, those two miles under the Caucasus Mountains that were the only way in for the 58th. In poured 15,000 men and 150 tanks, and that shut up the mouse that roared. All true, and yet Saakashvili is not the main culprit, but Russia`s prime minister, Vladimir Putin. It began not on Aug. 8, but in July--with a vast military exercise, "Caucasus 2008," as dress rehearsal for the invasion. As a flanking maneuver, Moscow handed out thousands of passports to South Ossetians (legally Georgians) to have a nice PR gambit ready: "What, aggressors us? We are just protecting the Motherland`s citizens." So here we are--at the fourth Russian conquest of Georgia. The first bites were taken by Catherine the Great, annexation was completed by

Aleksandr II in 1864 and, after three years of independence, Georgia was grabbed by the Bolsheviks in 1921. So let`s talk about "continuity." Continuity has to do with power politics, conquest and domination, the ways of states since time immemorial. And with Russian behavior as exemplified by its actions on Aug. 8. We now look back in disbelief at the Gorbachev-Yeltsin era of docility (1985-2000). How could we think that Russia would stop being Russia? You don`t have to foam at the mouth as did Friedrich Engels, the granddaddy of communism, in 1890 when he targeted the "steely stamina" behind Russia`s endless quest to make the country "vast, mighty and feared--and to pave the way to world domination." But you can listen to Aleksandr III, tsar from 1881 to 1894, who famously proclaimed, "Russia has only two reliable allies--its Army and Navy." That phrase was repeated by Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov in 2003 at the time of the Iraq War, and it highlights what makes Putin tick. It`s power and advantage; if you`ve got it, use it--panzers, pipelines and all. As the West turned to climate and hunger, as it celebrated "soft power" and the cracking of sovereignty under the hammer blows of humanitarianism, Putin went back to "hard" power, using gas to cow his neighbors from the Baltics via Belarus to the Ukraine, and tanks to reconquer what he claims is rightfully his. Today, it is Georgia. What will it be tomorrow? The ex-Soviet republic Azerbaijan, swimming on an ocean of oil? Kazakhstan, one of Europe`s critical gas suppliers via pipelines running through Georgia, the last

conduit not controlled by Russia? How about Kiev, now independent, but historically the very core of Russia? Those who have chastised Saakashvili for tweaking the bear are also pleading clemency for Putin. They invoke Russia`s humiliation in the cold war, the loss of its empire (14 out of 15 republics chose independence) and the forward march of NATO and the European Union across the former Iron Curtain. So what? Does this mean Russia has a right to an empire? That its ex-vassals from the Baltic to Bulgaria have no right to autonomy and safety? Forty years ago, the Brezhnev doctrine proclaimed "once socialist, always socialist" as pretext for crushing the Prague Spring. Shall we now have a Putin doctrine: "Once Russian, always Russian?" Even the propitiators would not savor this kind of retro imperialism. Nor is the West as powerless as the hand-wringers pretend. The first order of business must be massive reconstruction aid to Georgia. Saakashvili may be a fool, but he is a democratic one, and he is a lot better than a Putin puppet. The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, was right when she pronounced in Tbilisi: "Georgia will be a member of NATO; it wants to be one." Such confidence-building measures should also extend to the new NATO members. To avoid riling the bear, the alliance did not station its troops in Poland et al. Now is the time to build the infrastructure for rapid deployment and to practice swift reinforcement. It is more important to assure Poland than to pet Putin. Third, Russia must leave Georgia or face diplomatic

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quarantine and suspension of institutionalized dialogue. Isn't this awfully soft stuff? Yes, but it will be very lonely for neo-tsar Vladimir if, like Aleksandr, he wants to rely only on his Army and Navy. Win-win, to

paraphrase Churchill, is better than war-war. Come to think of it, there is this American president who in his first term also thought that raw power would conquer all. Say hello to George W., Vladimir. Joffe is

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