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4 Years After the War, It's Still Georgia's Fault

By Paul Rimple

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On Wednesday, 17,000 Georgian refugees will look north toward the mountains where they once lived and recall how they fled under a Russian barrage during the five-day war with Russia in 2008.

Their villages in South Ossetia exist in memory only because after Russian troops swept in and marauders from the North Caucasus looted their homes, the villagers' homes were razed.

The South Ossetian winners of the war shrug their shoulders and say action brings reaction. They point at the destruction of Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, although when the smoke cleared it was hard to discern what damage was inflicted by the Georgian offensive and what by the Russian counterattack. It's Georgia's fault anyway, they say.

In the big picture, first blood is irrelevant. When the world looks at the war, they don't see

Tbilisi making an irrational decision to strike. They see Russian overkill. Russians invaded deep into Georgian territory, bombed targets in Tbilisi and blasted civilians in Gori and Poti on the Black Sea.

The Kremlin wasn't defending South Ossetia; it was trying to destroy Georgia's capability to wage war. On U.S. Capitol Hill, "Russia's occupation of Georgian territory" is now a catchphrase.

Russian hardliners believe the conflict was a U.S. proxy war waged against Russia. But in reality, Georgia is a partner, not a U.S. vassal state. Washington makes suggestions — some of which are accepted, while others are not.

Since 2002, when the United States began training Georgian soldiers to contain its terrorist threat and prevent a Russian incursion into its territory, the message was clear: "Do not try to take on Russia."

Former President George W. Bush reiterated this message twice on his 2005 visit by telling Saakashvili that "the U.S. cavalry won't be coming over " should Georgia go to war with Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Bush kept good on his word.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin still sees U.S. military support as a threat, even though the United States has been transparent with its aid and does not provide Georgia with heavy weaponry.

Meanwhile, Russia, the only party that hasn't issued a nonuse of force commitment, maintains that its 10,000 troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and tactical missiles aimed at Tbilisi guarantee peace in the region.

It's been four years and we are still debating who the biggest threat is instead of asking how to reduce it so that people can return home.

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