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Georgian humiliation and EU mediation
of the Russo-Georgian War

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“The single most underappreciated force in international relations is humiliation”

(Friedman as cited in Wolf, 2011, p. 1)

1. Introduction

The role of emotions in international relations has been a contested subject. While some scholars argue that only realist theory has merit when it comes to decision-making, others highlight that state interests cannot be separated from emotions (Coicaud, 2015, p. 35). More specifically, misrecognition and respect are shown to have a strong influence on state behaviour (Wolf, 2011, p. 22). This paper will analyse the role of humiliation in international relations by investigating the case of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008.

The relevance of this study is two-fold. Firstly, though the role of emotion in international relations has been the object of increasing academic interest, the field would benefit from analyses that consider its relevance to mediation efforts. Secondly, scholarship on emotion in IR seems to focus on the honour and humiliation of great powers, whereas smaller states are underrepresented. Most notably, there are a myriad of studies to be found about Russian honour, but few seriously consider the Georgian perspective. Almost ironically, this seems to reinforce the narrative that these emotions ‘do not matter’, a salient source of humiliation in the first place.

The Russo-Georgian war was the result of a long history of humiliation and ultimately led to Georgia’s attempt to regain control over pro-Russian breakaway region South Ossetia (Tsygankov & Tarver-Wahlquist, 2009, p. 313). The conflict escalated into a Russian offensive that resulted in the invasion of Georgia’s undisputed territory. The war was ultimately ended through a ceasefire mediated by the European Union under French presidency (Forsberg & Seppo, 2011, p. 126). Though the source of Georgia’s humiliation lies long before the Russo-Georgian war, this paper will show that the EU mediation process failed to adequately consider the humiliation narratives that were already ingrained in the Georgian identity. Because of this, the French unintendedly reinforced these dynamics, resulting in increased salience of the humiliation narrative in Georgian political discourse. The research question of the paper will thus be as follows: *How did the EU fail to address the concepts of honour, dignity, and humiliation in its mediation of the Russo-Georgian War, and what consequences arose from these limitations?* It should be noted that this question is factor oriented, and thus aims to investigate how honour, dignity and humiliation serve to explain the narratives of Georgian political discourse.

2. Theoretical Framework

The question of state humiliation and its consequences require a comprehensive inquiry into the role of emotions in international relations. To that end, this theoretical framework will investigate the conceptualisations of honour & dignity, recognition & respect, and status anxiety in an effort to outline the particular conceptual nuances that are required to understand Georgian national humiliation in the context of the Russo-Georgian war.

The literature on state emotions often makes a distinction between the concepts of honour and dignity. Friedrichs (2015) delineates between honour and dignity societies, the former being represented by countries such as Russia, and the latter by Western states such as France. Within this framework, he argues that honour cultures experience challenges due to the ambiguous nature of honour, which is described as “internalized” and “contestable” (Friedrichs, 2015, p. 69). Honour cultures experience an instable self-image because their honour is both internal and external, and therefore contradictory. On the one hand honour is seen as a birthright, on the other it may be challenged continuously by other entities. Consequentially, honour is treated as something that must be defended from these challenges.

This is contrasted by dignity cultures, where status is considered “intrinsic and inalienable” (Friedrichs, 2015, p. 70). In these systems, self-worth is seen as innate to the human state, and dignity cannot be externally challenged. Dignity is considered a common good that can be defended by insisting on its universal nature (p. 74). Followingly, dignity cultures see social harmony as a self-reinforcing mechanism. Because of this, conceptions of status and humiliation are considered peripheral and irrelevant, as self-worth is completely separated from external perceptions and opinions (p. 79). The problem with this conception of dignity is that it is rather unreflective and does not mirror political realities. In fact, current geopolitical challenges, also involving Western states from so-called dignity cultures, exhibit that external perception and recognition are still front and centre in decision-making processes. Dignity, even if it is narrowly defined as right to sovereignty and territorial integrity, is continuously challenged as most recently exemplified by the war in Ukraine or election interference in Georgia.

The theory on honour and dignity would therefore benefit from a closer integration between the two. I propose that, in the context of humiliation, honour and dignity should not be regarded as

separate but rather as constituting the opposite ends of a spectrum. Respecting honour includes what Wolf (2011) calls “non-evaluative” consideration (Wolf, 2011, p. 4). This means that respecting one’s honour includes considering intangible norms of interaction, such as making sure an actor feels taken seriously. Recognising dignity, on the other end, only encompasses respecting formal consolidated international norms such as territorial integrity (Barnhart, 2020, p. 18). To further evaluate this spectrum, it is valuable to consider the conceptual nuance between respect and recognition.

Lindemann (2010) claims that “misrecognition of status is a decisive cause for war and only recognition can lead to lasting peace” (Lindemann, as cited in Friedrichs, 2015, p. 66). However, conceptions of recognition and respect vary across scholarship on humiliation. I propose that recognition and respect, too, are part of a spectrum. Within this framework recognition is linked with dignity, in the sense that it encompasses a narrow conception of respect that focusses on formal agreements or norms. I agree with Wolf (2011) that respect covers a broader, more ‘emotional’, expectation of patterns of interaction (p. 4). However, the perception of (dis)respect or (mis)recognition is highly subjective. As Wolf (2011) posits: “As I understand the term, an actor feels disrespected when others – directly or by implication – lower her rank or question claims on which she grounds her status position – as she herself perceives it!” (Wolf, 2011, p. 3).

Humiliation through misrecognition is in this sense not objectively established but rather follows from denying states or actors the status they feel entitled to (Gurr, as cited in Friedrichs, 2015, p. 66). However, academic consensus dictates that escalation from misrecognition cannot be created out of thin air (Wolf, 2011, p. 5). As honour and dignity are dependent on external recognition, disrespecting a state’s status perception will only lead to conflict if this status identity is already instable. The degree to which a state may feel misrecognised or disrespected will thus depend on the degree to which it feels insecure about its position, in addition to how different the externally reflected status is from the status it feels entitled to (Gurr, 1970, as cited in Friedrichs, 2015, p. 72). The interactions and responses following from this process of (mis)recognition is what scholars have coined status anxiety.

Great powers may be more likely to feel disrespected, as they are more likely to expect “non-evaluative” consideration beyond formal recognition (Wolf, 2011, p. 4; Barnhart, 2020, p. 18). Small states, on the other hand, often expect little beyond the recognition of their dignity

(Barnhart, 2020, p. 18). Though disrespect may be normatively regarded as ‘worse’ by great powers with an expectation of respect, it should be noted that denial of recognition, and thus dignity by extension, is regarded as the most destructive form of humiliation (Wolf, 2011, p. 15). This is especially painful for small status-seeking states, as status seeking has become part of domestic legitimation and state identity politics (Neumann & De Carvalho, 2015, p. 5). Thus, a denial of recognition is not only detrimental to domestic dignity, but also to the state’s identity on the world stage.

Failed status seeking on the international stage may therefore result in national humiliation. Humiliation is distinct from shame in that the former entails a feeling of injustice (Barnhart, 2020, p. 16). Where the latter leads to a decrease in self-esteem, humiliation includes externalised anger towards the ‘humiliator’ for misrecognising its self-perceived status. However, most importantly, humiliation is characterised by an inability to counteract this misrecognition resulting in a sense of powerlessness (Friedrichs, 2015, p. 73; Barnhart, 2020, p. 16). Great powers often show little regard for the honour or dignity of their inferiors, leading to growing resentment and grievances which may backfire into stronger responses once the small state obtains the necessary resources for escalation (Friedrichs, 2015, p. 73). The nature of humiliation is inherently subjective (Barnhart, 2020, p. 16). This means that humiliated states do not necessarily need external confirmation of their internal perception (p. 27). Followingly, violations of honour and dignity are not always intended by the ‘perpetrator’ (p. 16).

As posited by Barnhart (2020) in her definition of humiliation: “Failure to recognize another’s rights and privileges or to sufficiently attend to the state’s interests presents an image of the state on the world stage as inferior and weak” (Barnhart, 2020, p. 18). Extreme cases of humiliation, such as violations of dignity, will elicit the most extreme responses (Wolf, 2011, p. 32). Signs of extreme humiliation are often indicated by premature decision-making with little eye for material consequences or strategic interests (pp. 11-12). According to Barnhart (2020), there are several factors that make defeat particularly humiliating, including: (1) degree of surprise concerning the defeat (increasing feelings of perception injustice), (2) feeling like having had a military advantage, (3) being the initiator of the conflict, (4) shorter duration of the conflict, (5) loss of territory, (6) failure to protect citizens, (7) longevity and history of humiliation with the same perpetrator, (8) publicity, and (9) being defeated by a higher status state (Barnhart, 2020, pp. 20, 21, 24, 25, 27, 28). Notable is the finding that lower status states

are less likely to experience humiliation from international failure, due to a lower expectation of influence (p. 34).

To understand the specific role of mediation within humiliating conflict, there are some additional findings from the literature that should be highlighted. As an antithesis to humiliation, an experience of respect and feeling accepted as a group member increases the chances of cooperative behaviour and compliance (Wolf, 2011, pp. 21-22). Like humiliation, status and respect are based on subjective estimates of state's standing in the international hierarchy (Barnhart, 2020, p. 19). Mediators should therefore base themselves on state's subjective expectations and understandings, rather than the assessment of the mediator themselves, to be effective peacebuilders (Wolf, 2011, p. 11). In addition to the formal material negotiations, mediators must pay attention to the narratives of humiliation that the conflict is based on, and that may emerge from it, to be able to build lasting peace and address emotional grievances (Majeed, 2024, p. 2; Barnhart, 2020, p. 34).

3. Methodology

As the theoretical framework highlights, humiliation can play a significant role in the currents of peace and conflict. It is therefore relevant to assess how France, on behalf of the EU, failed to take humiliation into account during its mediation of the Russo-Georgian war. The following analysis will consist of two parts. Firstly, I put forward an evaluation of the mediation process through the lens of national humiliation. This section will highlight the limitations of EU mediation, including its failure to bear in mind the context of humiliation. As a result of this neglect, lingering tensions and grievances in Georgia exacerbate conflict dynamics. Secondly, this conclusion will be supported by a speech analysis highlighting how narratives of humiliation are still prevalent in Georgia's politics. In addition, the salience of this narrative will be confirmed by data from public opinion polls.

4.1 Mediation Evaluation

This analysis will focus on the role of mediation in the reinforcement of Georgian humiliation. However, it should be noted that Georgia's attempt to restore control over the South Ossetian

capital Tskhinvali on the night of August 8, 2008 appears to be the result of strategic errors, with a strong disregard for the material consequences for the Georgian state, including Russian control over energy resources and Russia's economic leverage (Markedonov, as cited in Kernen & Sussex, 2012, p. 99). The 'reckless' character of the escalation was further confirmed by Saakashvili's military miscalculations, such as "the unexpected proximity of Russian forces, misplaced anticipation of a speedy victory, and unrealistic expectations of external military assistance" (Kernen & Sussex, 2012, p. 100).

These misjudgements seem to be symptomatic of what Wolf (2011) identifies as extreme humiliation, where emotional grievances cloud the judgment of political leaders leading to premature decision-making (pp. 11-12). It is important to understand that Georgia was already experiencing this extreme humiliation ahead of the start of the EU mediation process. In addition, the context of Georgia's increased Westernisation ahead of the Russo-Georgian war is important to underline. Saakashvili had been seeking relations with the EU, US, and NATO since his rise to power in 2004 (Kernen & Sussex, 2012, p. 97). Increased Europeanisation is exemplified by Georgia's inclusion in the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004, and the 2006 ENP action plan outlining democracy and rule of law as focus areas (Georgia Embassy USA, 2014; Information Center on NATO and the EU, 2023). Saakashvili's increasingly anti-Russian narratives made the West a logical ally (Kernen & Sussex, 2012, p. 100). As the analysis will show, however, expectations of support from the EU were not met.

One of the central sources of humiliation for Georgia in the EU mediation process was the exclusion of territorial integrity from the final ceasefire agreement, effectively challenging the fundamentals Georgia's dignity. While the initial proposal included a clause affirming Georgia's sovereignty, the final six-point peace plan omitted this provision due to Russian objections (Forsberg & Seppo, 2011, p. 126). The objections to this clause based themselves on the right to protect Russian citizens abroad, which had become especially relevant in South Ossetia due to the Russian policy of passportisation that had been going in the breakaway region since 2002 (Kernen & Sussex, 2012, p. 101). Georgia, on the other hand appealed to the traditional Westphalian notion of sovereignty, underlining territorial integrity (p. 105). Though the EU's normative values aligned more closely with this Westphalian understanding, its recent recognition of Kosovo complicated its ability to stick up for Georgian dignity (p. 107). As a result, the EU, in its resolve to negotiate peace, had to implicitly validate the Russian narrative by omitting recognition of Georgian sovereignty in the final ceasefire agreement (Forsberg &

Seppo, 2011, p. 126). Because of Georgia's weaker position in comparison to Russia, it was thus coerced into accepting an unfavourable agreement that violated its dignity.

The EU's insistence on including South Ossetian and Abkhazian delegations in the Geneva peace talks further eroded Georgian dignity. While the EU aimed to ensure inclusive dialogue, this decision was perceived by Georgia as legitimising the independence claims of these breakaway regions (Forsberg & Seppo, 2011, p. 131). This move contradicted the EU's normative agenda of promoting Georgian territorial integrity and was perceived as a direct challenge to Georgia's sovereignty. Though the EU was initially committed to protecting Georgia's dignity, pragmatism and the ambition of stability eventually persuaded it to *de facto* recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and to coerce Georgia into allowing them to take a seat at the table (pp. 132-133).

The EU's approach during the mediation process appeared to prioritise maintaining relations with Russia over preventing Georgian humiliation. French President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to negotiate personally with Russian leaders, while sending officials to negotiate in Georgia, reinforced a perception that Russia's status as a great power took precedence over Georgia's concerns (Forsberg & Seppo, 2011, p. 125). This dynamic aligns with Barnhart's (2020) finding that humiliation often arises from interactions between lower-status and higher-status states, particularly when the former feels disregarded. Further confirmation of this perception was found in the 2008 EU emergency summit in Avignon. The summit was called to discuss the issue of Russia not withdrawing its troops in a timely manner, but the members did not agree to impose additional sanctions, or to send EU peacekeepers to Georgia (Forsberg & Seppo, 2011, p. 127). Russia's satisfaction with this decision, with Putin stating, "common sense prevailed", added further insult to Georgia's injury (Putin, as cited in Forsberg & Seppo, 2011, p. 127).

Perceptions of Russia being taken more seriously were compounded by the perceived prioritisation of economic ties with Russia by the EU. The EU refused to introduce economic sanctions to force Russia to withdraw its troops more quickly, or to withdraw its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which were vital elements of the peace plan in terms of Georgia's dignity (Forsberg & Seppo, 2011, p. 131). This grievance was exacerbated by the EU-Russia Summit held in November of 2008. By this point in time, Russia had still not complied completely with the six-point peace plan (p. 127). Nevertheless, the consensus was that Russia

had complied 'enough', and that the EU-Russia partnership was ready to focus on economic relations, such as Russia's accession to the WTO, which the EU supported (p. 128).

Both the perceived prioritisation of Russia in terms of status and economic relations were possibly exacerbated by the French Presidency of the EU during the mediation process. Firstly, the EU was Russia's preferred mediator over NATO or the US, which were in turn preferred by Georgia (Forsberg & Seppo, 2011, p. 132). France enjoyed a relatively impartial image, in part due to its great power status. More relevant, however, was France's hesitancy to EU expansion initiatives and its conservative stance on including Georgia in NATO programmes (p. 132). Because of this, Saakashvili did not receive the support he expected from the West during the mediation process, further aggravating Georgia's national humiliation (Kernen & Sussex, 2012, p. 97). However, it should be noted that mediation is highly conditional on acceptance of the mediator by both conflict parties. It may thus be questioned if a more Georgian-minded EU presidency, such as by Lithuania, would have been acceptable to Russia.

The highly publicised nature of the ceasefire negotiations exacerbated Georgia's sense of humiliation. Though it was Georgia that initially pushed for the internationalisation of the conflict in an effort to gain external support, the unexpectedly neutral approach of the EU ultimately resulted in humiliation (Kernen & Sussex, 2012, p. 115). As Barnhart (2020) notes, public incidents of misrecognition heighten feelings of powerlessness and injustice. For Georgia, the EU's framing of the war, including the conclusions of its fact-finding mission, added to this humiliation. The mission concluded that Georgia initiated hostilities, a narrative that the Georgian government rejected as unjust and one that reinforced its perception of being misrepresented on the international stage (Forsberg & Seppo, 2011, p. 130).

4.2 Humiliation Narratives in Georgian Political Discourse

The EU's actions during mediation contributed to a narrative of humiliation that persists in Georgian political discourse. The perceived failure to adequately support Georgia's sovereignty and dignity has influenced political narratives, which show symptoms of humiliation to this day. Several speeches by prominent Georgian politicians after the escalations of the Russo-Georgian war serve as data to prove the prominence of this narrative. The following section will outline *how* the humiliation narrative is employed in Georgian political discourse.

Firstly, the longevity and salience of Russian humiliation of the Georgian people is often underlined by drawing upon themes of enslavement. This is exemplified by Saakashvili's address on August 11, 2008, where he described the Russian invasion as an attempt at the "repeated occupation and enslavement of Georgia" (Saakashvili, as cited in Civil Georgia, 2008). In doing so, politicians try to present Georgia as the recurrent victim of Russian imperialism, a frame which historically evokes strong reactions from the Georgian public. Similar themes can be found in Zurabishvili's Independence Day Speech in 2022, 14 years after the escalations, where she underscores that Georgia "once and for all refused to be part of another country, refused slavery" (Zurabishvili, 2022). The invocation of the slavery theme serves to underline the historical nature of the injustices committed against Georgia. This aligns with the theoretical framework's finding that humiliation is often deeply tied to historical and symbolic narratives of misrecognition (Friedrichs, 2015).

Secondly, both Saakashvili and Zurabishvili have included mentions of children when discussing the conflict, aiming to personify the stakes and reinforce the moral urgency of Georgia's struggle. Saakashvili's 2008 address emphasised that "the officials of foreign countries should never define the future of our children" (Saakashvili, as cited in Civil Georgia, 2008), while Zurabishvili in 2022 similarly stated that "the future of our children is in our hands" (Zurabishvili, 2022). By highlighting this narrative, violations of dignity are not only a case of historical humiliation (as underlined by the enslavement narrative) but have also become a concern for the future. The perceived failure to secure a better future for the next generation is framed as another unbearable consequence of misrecognition. By combining narratives of enslavement with narratives of generational responsibility, politicians highlight the ever-enduring nature of humiliation. This ties to Barnhart's (2020) finding that humiliation involves frustration over the inability to defend against perceived slights.

Thirdly, another major theme emerging from the political discourse is an appeal to collective sovereignty. Saakashvili's address to the United Nations in 2008 underlined the global implications of Russia's actions, arguing that they threatened "the inviolability of sovereign borders" and highlighted a need to reflect on "our attitude toward armed aggression in all places" (Saakashvili, 2008). Similarly, Zurabishvili in 2022 linked Georgia's struggle to Ukraine's defense of "freedom, sovereignty, and independence," framing both conflicts as essential to the future of a "united, strong, free Europe" (Zurabishvili, 2022). By positioning Georgia's struggle as part of a global struggle against aggression, Georgian leaders aim to create

the sense that a violation to Georgia's dignity constitutes a violation to international dignity, hoping to evoke a stronger reaction from the international community.

Lastly, narratives of powerlessness and dependence highlight the deep impact of humiliation on Georgian political discourse. This is exemplified by Saakashvili's address to the European Parliament in 2010, where he openly acknowledges Georgia's dependence on international support: "We depend on you" (Saakashvili, 2010). The asymmetry of Georgia's relationship with the West highlights its inability to secure its sovereignty without external assistance, further reinforcing perceptions of humiliation. Furthermore, the rhetoric of having to defend itself in the face of an impossible opponent captures the essence of humiliation: "A small country of less than five million being trampled by a neighbor 300 times its size" (Saakashvili, 2008). Like Friedrich (2015) described, humiliation is marked by a powerlessness where actors feel unable to counteract their marginalisation.

4.3 Narrative Salience

Data from public opinion polls conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) support the salience of humiliation narratives in Georgia, but also reflect the highly complicated nature of a small state caught in the middle of a great power battle. When questioned about the biggest threat to Georgian national security, most respondents (27%) saw Russian military aggression as the most dangerous (NDI, 2023, p. 81). In addition, 11% regarded the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as the most threatening, pointing to continued mistrust from the Russo-Georgian war. Majority of Georgians (66%) preferred EU-NATO alignment over Russian alignment when having to choose (p. 94). However, a considerable percentage of respondents (34-46%) prefer combining Western alignment with maintaining good relations with Russia (p. 80). These numbers seem to suggest that, although humiliation has led to an increased ambition to align with the West, it has also ingrained a sense of appeasement and respect for Russia into the Georgian public opinion. Whether this is due to true trust in Russia, or simply out of fear of angering it, is a question for subsequent research to investigate.

5. Conclusion

The theoretical framework and analysis in this paper draw a picture of how EU mediation during the Russo-Georgian War reinforced narratives of humiliation in Georgia. This notion is supported by the evidence of the prevalence of this narrative in political discourse. The theoretical framework outlined how the conceptual distinction between honour and dignity is overemphasised by the literature on state emotions. Consequentially, it argued that respect includes non-evaluative norms of interaction, whereas misrecognition is limited to the violation of consolidated international agreements. These agreements usually entail respect for territorial integrity. Important to note here is that the misrecognition and disrespect, and humiliation by extension, reside in the subjective experience. Perpetrators of humiliation therefore need not have the intention to humiliate. Furthermore, humiliation is characterised by the feeling of misrecognition of dignity, without being able to counteract this violation. Denial of dignity, for example in the form of territory violations, is regarded as the most destructive form of humiliation.

Mediators must take the concept of humiliation into account when reflecting on their practices. During the Russo-Georgian War, the EU failed to adequately consider the humiliating effects of the mediation process on Georgian dignity. These failures include the inability to incorporate territorial integrity as a provision in the final agreement, the implicit validation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by having them involved in negotiations, the perception of prioritisation of Russia as a great power, the prioritisation of economic interests above upholding the peace agreement, the relatively neutral attitude of the French EU presidency, and perceived misrecognition of Georgia's right to defend itself through the EU sponsored investigative report. As a result, humiliation narratives remain prevalent in Georgian political discourse to this day. This narrative is characterised by themes of enslavement, duty to protect the future, appeal to collective sovereignty, and powerlessness. The salience of these narratives is supported by public opinion poll data from the National Democratic Institute. Taken together, the analysis highlights how mediators should be aware of the concept of humiliation within their practice, so that they can assess its long-term consequences to comprehensive peacebuilding.

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