The Role of Violence in Russian Politics and Machiavelli’s Perspective

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Niccolò Machiavelli is famously known and interpreted in political science for his realism. His recommendations for The Prince are stated in various forms, particularly in terms of the role of violence in politics. However, his intentions are much more restrictive and prudent than it seems at the first sight. Violence is a necessity in political life, but it needs to be properly justified, otherwise it does not benefit either the ruler or the ruled. He endorses violence but conditions it by prudence and lack of cruelty. Excessive cruelty leads to hatred and citizens’ hatred would lead to limitations of power of the ruler/prince. “The prince must aim to be feared without being hated”. On this basis, I will present a case study of the use of violence by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his considered “spheres of influence”, particularly in the territory of Georgia in 2008 and analyse through Machiavelli lens, whether the use of violence can be considered to be justified as Machiavelli writes, “yet it cannot be called virtù to kill fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be treacherous, pitiless, irreligious. These ways can win a prince power but not glory”.

Keywords: Violence, Machiavelli, Russia, Georgia, Coercion

Introduction

Niccolò Machiavelli is famously known and interpreted in political science for his realism. Some authors, such as Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, referred to Machiavelli as the most important author in terms of defining the state. The state is a mixture of will and force, or force and morality. In the most famous work of Machiavelli, the Prince, Machiavelli declared that there are two means of fighting: “one according to the laws, the other with force, the first way is proper to man, the second to beasts” (Hoffman & Graham, 2013, p. 15). Machiavelli argued that the first is often not sufficient to maintain power, so that “it becomes necessary to have recourse to the second” (Machiavelli, 1998, p. 58). The state was seen as analogous to the mythical creature, the centaur, which was half-human and half-beast. Gramsci embraced this argument even though he focused more on the legal and moral aspects of the state. The state is linked to force and violence but equally important is law, morality, fundamental rights, and freedoms (Gramsci, 1971, p. 170 in: Hoffman & Graham, 2013, p. 15)

The work of Machiavelli is thus engaged with the relationship between the violence and politics in the political community (Frazer & Hutchings, 2011). There is a necessary and mutual connection between politics and violence, however, there is a distinction between cruel violence and the so-called virtuous violence (Frazer
& Hutchings, 2011). According to Machiavelli, political violence is not just violence per se. Machiavelli begins The Art of War with the following observation:

“For all the arts that are ordered in a city for the sake of the common good of men, all the orders made there for living in fear of the laws and of God, would be in vain if defences were not prepared” (Machiavelli, 2003 [1521]: preface, p. 3).

Violence is a necessity in political life. But it has to be pursued for the sake of the common good and it has to have a good end in itself. In addition, it needs to be properly justified otherwise it does not benefit either the ruler or the ruled. Machiavelli endorses violence but conditions it by prudence and lack of cruelty. Excessive cruelty leads to hatred and citizens’ hatred would lead to limitations of power of the ruler/prince. “The prince must aim to be feared without being hated” (Baker, 2009, p. 312).

On this basis, I will present a case study of the use of violence by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his considered “spheres of influence”, particularly in the territory of Georgia since 2008 and analyse through Machiavelli lens, whether the use of violence can be considered to be justified. As Machiavelli (2003 [1521]) writes, “yet it cannot be called virtù to kill fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be treacherous, pitiless, irreligious. These ways can win a prince power but not glory” (p. 311).

First part of the paper will focus on Georgia and its geopolitical significance for Russia and how military conquest would be viewed through Machiavelli lens. The second part will analyse different coercion tools used by Russian leadership (Vladimir Putin).

**Georgia and Its Significance**

Relations between Russia and its southern neighbour Georgia have been characterised by tension and mutual mistrust, following Georgia’s independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Notable areas of contention have included separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the presence of Russian military bases on Georgian territory and transit routes for hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea region. Russia has been very coercive in its diplomacy towards Georgia. It is unhappy with Georgia’s pro-Western tendencies and since 1991, Moscow has sought to exert pressure on the country and maintain its influence in the South Caucasus through a variety of means. The military conflict in August 2008 was merely as the logical culmination of Russian strategy, an extension of policies that served to reinforce Russia’s coercive diplomacy efforts in the other former Soviet states, notably the Ukraine (German, 2009, p. 225).

The 2008 crisis in Georgia is a manifestation of a deeply rooted conflict. The Georgia conflict is geopolitical, reflecting in particular Russia’s position on the international stage, reaction to the West’s recognition of Kosovo in 2008, enlargement of NATO to the East, which Russia considers to be a breach of agreements made during the negotiation in 1990 on German reunification, and Russian misgivings in other areas such as the NATO missile shield. It is also reflecting the perceived risk of losing Russia’s influence on Southern Caucasus, where it has strategic interest (the oil and gas pipelines from Azerbaijan and Central Asia) and proximity to the troublesome Northern Caucasus with Chechnya and the forgotten war in Dagestan (EEAS Analysis, 2012a).

Russia’s recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia has made it more difficult to find a solution to the Georgia conflict. Such solution would probably be easier to find if it was part of a broader geopolitical engagement with Russia (EEAS Analysis, 2012a, 2012b).
The conflict between Georgia and the breakaway areas of Abkhazia (ABK) and South Ossetia (SO) and the respective perceptions of the populations should be viewed on the background of not only the war in 2008, but also the wars in 1991-1992 between Georgia and SO and in 1992-1993 between Georgia and ABK during which all sides committed human rights violations towards the civilian population, including ethnic cleansing that resulted in large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs). About 250,000 Georgians fled from ABK and SO to Georgia during those wars, after which there was no longer a population majority of Georgians in ABK. In comparison, the short war in 2008 resulted in 30,000 IDPs from only SO Ossetia/Abkhazia relationship—which has to be factored into the analysis (EEAS Analysis, 2012b).

The use of violence in case of Georgia would be through Machiavelli lens justified as it can be perceived as the external threat. There are two different roles of violence for two different types of situations, i.e. threats from the external and internal enemies. If there is a threat to the political community from the outside, there is a much greater scope for violence and its cruelty.

In Machiavelli’s world, the geopolitical situation involved a high degree of insecurity, stemming not only from the terrain but also from the multiplicity of actors and enemies, “the countryside outside the city [was] more threatening and the propensity of other powers to make war, invade, lay siege and spoil more immediate”. (Frazer & Hutchings, 2011, p. 59). In several works of Machiavelli’s, the references to threats and insecurity are clearly made: “In the *Florentine Histories* the parties to the raids and alarms are families and houses, who are fighting for dominance in the city setting; war has its focus enriching oneself (whether one is a family, a party or a city state) and impoverishing the enemy” (Machiavelli, 1988b [1525], book V, ch. 1 and passim in Frazer & Hutchings, 2011, p. 59). *The Discourses*, defines the place and defence of cities—the city is a built structure, its people and its hinterland, and of course its divisions and its government. This work is in mainly a reflexion of the conditions of stable domination by a prince or by a republican government, including the maintenance of the proper army and the right kind of conduct in war whether one is attacking or being attacked (Machiavelli, 1970 [1531], book II, pp. 20, 27; book III, p. 39 in Frazer & Hutchings, 2011, p. 59). *The Prince*, could be studied in the similar manner. The successful ruler has to conduct himself in such a way as to maintain order inside the city, and crucially must not be pusillanimous or disorganised in war. Conquest has to be managed appropriately (Machiavelli, 1988a [1532], ch. III) and military organisation and the need for military competence and valour are continuous themes (Machiavelli, 1988a [1532], chs XII-XIV, chs XX-XXI, ch. XXIV in Frazer & Hutchings, 2011, p. 59).

Concerning the idea of conquest and war, it is worth noting that Italian fascist considered Machiavelli as a founding founder of fascist theory. Fascism drew upon prejudices and stereotypes that are rooted in tradition. It saw itself as resurrecting the glories of the Roman Empire and Rocco, an Italian fascist saw Machiavelli as the most important person to refer to in this regard. Thus, expansion towards Georgia and “colonisation” of areas that belong to the Russia to its sphere of influence would be according to Machiavelli considered as justified. In addition, the area has enormous geopolitical significance and Vladimir Putin and Russian leadership has been very conscious about that fact.

The Caucasus region is an area of growing importance in the contemporary security environment, particularly given regional instability and the potential threat to Western economic interests posed by its energy resources and transport infrastructure.

The region constitutes a vital land bridge between Asia and Europe, physically linking the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia with the Black Sea and Western Europe. Its role as a critical link between East and
West is demonstrated most vividly by its increasing importance as a transport and communications corridor, and most prominently as a transit route for hydrocarbons from the landlocked Caspian Sea region to international markets (German, 2009, p. 225).

Georgia is considered as the most pro-Western of the three South Caucasus states. Since its independence in 1991 Georgia has tried to maintain an autonomous foreign policy aimed at staying away from the Russian sphere of influence. After the 2003 Rose Revolution President Mikheil Saakashvili’s government has been engaging the EU, NATO, the OSCE, and the US and has consistently been showing its desire to integrate with the West. Integration into both NATO and the EU remains Georgia key priority. This is reflected in the dedicated sections in the country’s National Security concept and its Foreign Policy Strategy (German, 2009, p. 225).

President Vladimir Putin has insisted that Moscow will continue trying to influence affairs in former Soviet states, dismayed at perceived Western attempts to “manufacture democracy” in what it considers to be its own “strategic backyard”. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, has expressed his view that “Washington is infiltrating the post-Soviet space ever more actively: Ukraine and Georgia are graphic examples” and warned that if either country becomes NATO member state there will be a “substantial negative geopolitical shift”. (German, 2009, p. 226).

In an attempt to counterbalance Western influence, the Kremlin has adopted a strategy of coercive diplomacy. Moscow has been seeking to reassert its waning hegemony by attempting to manipulate separates conflicts in Georgia as foreign policy instruments. Vladimir Socor has identified what he describes as the Russian policy paradigm of controlled instability in the region, the ultimate goal of which in his opinion is to thwart the integration of the South Caucasus into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions (Vladimir Socor, 2004 in German, 2009, p. 226).

Russian actions in Georgia are not about coercing just the government in Tbilisi. Its actions are intended for a much wider audience, including other former Soviet states, but also the ethnic Georgians in the separation republics.

Since 2008 the international community has witnessed an unprecedented ethnic cleansing of Georgians in the villages of South Ossetia, in the adjacent villages of the Gori and Kareli Districts, as well as in Kodori Gorge/Upper Abkhazia (Ministry of Justice Georgia, 2008). And the Georgian Foreign Ministry has accused Moscow of provocative actions and persecutions of ethnic Georgians in the Gali district of Abkhazia since then (News Agenda GE, 2019).

Let us consider more in detail the tools of coercion, including the use of violence against the government and the people of Georgia. These tools will be then analyzed through Machiavelli lens, whether such a coercion would be justified or not.

**Tools of Coercion**

Since Georgia gained independence in 1991 there have been a series of crisis in Russian-Georgian relations, reflecting the latter’s increasingly close relationship with the West. Moscow has utilized a variety of means to maintain its influence over its southern neighbour and attempt to coerce it. Most important is the military presence and use of violence. Then it comes the economic pressure, psychological pressure (depriving of people of language and of other rights in Georgia and the separatist territories). To each coercive measure I will add analysis from Machiavelli’s perspective and whether these measures are justified or permissible.
Military presence would be through Machiavelli’s lens perfectly justified, if it remains uncruel and with a good purpose. As Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev confirmed repeatedly, military presence in separatist regions is there to help and protect the citizens (*The Economist*, 2008). On the other hand, ethnic cleansing, economic intimidation, and psychological pressures are tools of violence that cannot be considered as justified for a glorious Prince. It would be unacceptable to use such measures because it would not lead to citizens’ respect but rather the opposite.

**Military Presence and Use of Violence**

The efficacy of Russia’s coercive diplomacy *vis a vis* Georgia is underpinned by its considerable military presence in the Caucasus region. Not only does it have troops on the ground in Georgia, it also has a considerable military presence in neighbouring Armenia and across the border in the North Caucasus.

Until later 2007, Russia maintained military bases on Georgian territory, a hangover from the Soviet era. In 1999 former Russian President Boris Yeltsin agreed to an OSCE facilitated deal, which obligated Russia to hand back its four bases in Georgia before 1 July 2001. Only two bases were returned within this deadline. A new framework was drawn up in 2006, according to which the remaining two bases were to be completely vacated by the end of 2008. Moscow completed its withdrawal ahead of schedule, in November 2007. However, only a matter of months after the last Russian servicemen and military equipment had been withdrawn from Georgian territory, its interference in the separatist regions (which belong to the territorial integrity of Georgia according to the international law) increased dramatically (German, 2009, p. 227).

In 2008 the Russian Federation has strengthened its position in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with more than 20,000 troops on the ground and hardened the border by electrified barbwires. The situation has been worsening ever since and even though the EU has negotiated a ceasefire agreement according to which the Russians should withdraw its troops from the separation territories to their positions before the conflict, it has not been fulfilled. The situations on the boundary lines are now more than restricted than on the borders.

Military presence would be according to Machiavelli acceptable as it could be portrayed as a colonised territory that is according to its geopolitical significance needed. As Machiavelli writes, “yet it cannot be called virtù to kill fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be treacherous, pitiless, irreligious. These ways can win a prince power but not glory”. (Machiavelli, 2003, Ch. 8).

Machiavelli justified war and military force in inter-state conflict by reference to the historical reality, the necessity, and the value of the state itself. There is disappointment, from the perspective of this value-freighted state, with the people who constitute it, corrupted as they are by commerce and consumption. In order to justify the extraction of value, by way of force, from these people, the state must be freighted with historical value and ethical significance, over and above those very people. The point is that for Machiavelli, “the question which stirs us as we think beyond the grave of our own generation is not the well-being human beings will enjoy in the future but what kind of people they will be.” (Frazer & Hutchings, 2011, p. 68).

Just as he was aware of torture from personal experience, Machiavelli was aware of and incorporated into his ethics the human capacity for corruption, violence, and waging war. In order to establish a new political order, he saw arms as necessary. In chapter 19, for instance, he argues that a prince should not follow the example of the benevolent emperor Marcus in “maintaining power that is already established and secure”, but the example of the more brutal emperor Severus “in the courses of action that are necessary for establishing
himself in power" (1532/1988, p. 72 in Cosans & Reina, 2017, p. 280). In chapter 6, Machiavelli includes Moses as a leader who used arms, presumably referring to stoning and the death of the first born (Exodus 12: 29-34) when he claims:

“If Moses, Cyrus, Theseus and Romulus had been unarmed (diarmati), the new order which each of them established would not have been obeyed for very long, as happened in our times to Friar Girolamo Savonarola.” (1532/1988, p. 21 in Cosans & Reina, 2017, p. 280)

This is a proof of very strong connection between politics, military power, and violence. Military occupation was seen from Machiavelli’s perspective a necessary tool for maintenance of power. Looking through this lens, Putin’s use of military resources in Georgia and its breakaway regions would be considered as justified in order to establish as Machiavelli calls the new order.

However, actions that go beyond “necessary” military presence, that restrict rights of Georgian citizens are in my view not justified. In the Prince, Machiavelli has declared that the people want to be neither oppressed nor commanded by the aristocrats (grandi), but he strongly suggests that the people are more willing to be commanded by a good prince (McCormick, 2012, p. 722). In the Discourses, Machiavelli abandons altogether the notions that the people resist command by the grandi. In fact, he explicitly enjoins the grandi to command an armed citizenry in military areas rather than oppress an unarmed populace within the confines of their own city. In short Machiavelli clearly distinguishes between oppression, on the one hand, which the people rightfully resist, and government or command on the other, which they tolerate and even welcome, when performed well (McCormick, 2012, p. 722).

These aspects of oppression which would not be tolerated by Machiavelli are characterized in the following chapters. They include ethnic cleansing, economic pressure, psychological pressures, and other intimidations.

**Ethnic Cleansing**

Numerous international organizations and NGOs have been continuously reporting the ongoing grave human rights violation in Georgia by Russian federation and South Ossetian authorities. Two reports of Human Rights Watch speak about the large-scale of systematic attacks on the civilian population of Georgian ethnicity, namely that its researchers had:

“witnessed terrifying scenes or destruction in four villages that used to be populated exclusively by ethnic Georgians. According to the few remaining local residents, South Ossetian militias that were moving along the road looted the Georgian villages and set them on fire…” (Human Rights Watch, 13 August 2008)

The second report concerning the role of Russia with regard to those “terrifying scenes” says that “Russia is obligated to ensure the safety and well-being of civilians in the areas under its de facto control but civilians are clearly not being protected”. (Human Rights Watch, 28 August 2008).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees “expressed concern over reports of new forcible displacement caused by marauding militias north of the Georgian town of Gori near the boundary line with the breakaway region of South Ossetia” (UNHCR, 26 August 2008). According to UNHCR this group of newly displaced persons consisted of:

“elderly people who had remained in their homes throughout the conflict but had now been forced to flee by armed groups. The newly displaced said that some had been beaten, harassed and robbed, and that three persons had reportedly
been killed. The marauders were reportedly operating in the so-called buffer zone established along the boundary line with South Ossetia.” (UNHCR, 26 August 2008)

Despite many witnesses and reports, the international community ignores the situation in the territory of Georgia and ignores such fundamental restriction of fundamental human rights and freedoms. Such restriction clearly leads to citizens’ hatred and would not be supported by Machiavelli.

Following chapters explore other ways of intimidation and pressures, i.e. economic and psychological pressures.

**Economic Pressure**

Russia has consistently exerted economic pressure on Georgia as a means of maintaining leverage, exploiting the fact that it remains the key economic and military power in the country. Many key Georgian enterprises are in the hands of Russian investors, including critical infrastructure such as mobile telephone communications and energy. In the summer of 2003 electricity monopoly UES acquired Georgia’s principles power distributed ironically from American power company AES, provoking serious political controversy and public anger (German, 2009, p. 229).

Reflecting the Soviet legacy, Russia was also one of the principal markets for Georgian products, particularly wine, and mineral water, two of the Georgian wine exports, mineral water, and other articles. Economic intimidation has proved to be a very successful way from Moscow to exert pressure on Georgian civilians and therefore exploit domestic political tensions in Georgia, undermining the government. Diplomatic spats between the political elites in Moscow and Tbilisi do not have the same impacts on economic pressure, which serves to reinforce Russia’s pervasive influence on the minds of the civilian population (German, 2009, p. 230).

Economic intimidation clearly creates hatred and not only fear. Thus, such a tool would not be considered appropriate for “virtuous prince” according to Machiavelli.

**Psychological Pressures in Separatist Regions Accompanied by Borderisation Activities**

“Borderisation” activities, i.e. building fences and barbwires on the Administrative Boundary Lines (ABLs), from the side of breakaway regions with a great support of the Russian federation are highly discussed issue. “Borderisation” is criticized by the Georgian government as it goes against the status quo. Boundary lines slowly become borders and the entities are clearly more and more disconnected from the territory of Georgia. They also become a major obstacle for crossing ABL confidence building measures.

“Borderisation” activities along both ABLs have had an adverse impact on dialogue efforts, people-to people contact and have further entrenched positions. They have also affected the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism process as SO participants refuse to discuss the issue point blank. The Georgian opposition has employed rhetoric around the erection of fences to undermine the Government of Georgia’s new engagement initiatives (EEAS Archive, 2018).

The South Ossetian ABL is currently fenced completely with few exceptions. The ABL with Abkhazia has still worked to be done. It is also noted that SO ABL has been done in much more professional way with clearly more financial help from the Russian Federation than the Abkhazian ABL. Ukrainian crisis has also speeded up the “borderisation” efforts in Abkhazia and in the last months since the beginning of 2015 the length of fence has allegedly tripled and a barb wire was installed (Interviewed EUMM mission representative in 2017).
Another aspect that is connected to borderisation is the language issue. The rights of ethnic Georgians in both ABK and SO have come gradually under increasing pressure in the educational sphere. “Restrictions on teaching of ethnic GEO students in areas predominantly inhabited by ethnic Georgians continued. By September 2017, grades 1 to 6 in all schools were being taught in Russian.” (EEAS Archive, 2018). At the same time, commuting across the boundary lines for educational purposes became increasingly difficult since the closure of the three controlled crossing points has been accomplished.

In South Ossetia, access to mother tongue education for the ethnic Georgian population living in Akhalgori district also came under threat from September 2017. De facto laws modelled on the ABK template replaced Georgian with Russian as the language of instruction from grade 1-4 with immediate effect. This deprived children of the right to education in mother tongue, but also seriously damaged the quality of education as the reforms were ill prepared and apparently poorly implemented (EEAS Archive, 2018).

These pressures from the side of Russia would not be justified by Machiavelli, as these prevent people from having the right to move freely and the right to access to their mother tongue. These intimidation tactics together with ethnic cleansing and economic pressures produce in my view an unprecedented level of hatred in the citizens’ minds and would not constitute a virtuous prince according to Machiavelli’s vision.

As it was mentioned above, the second source of power Machiavelli refers to in The Prince, and is often overlooked when discussing Machiavellian leadership, is the goodwill that the people can develop towards a prince and his family if he governs them well over time. “The relationship a good prince and ruling family can acquire with their people allows power to emanate from the bottom up”. (Cosans & Reina, 2018, p. 7).

Machiavelli sees that people’s goodwill given to the prince is proportionate to the level of his power. This is especially evident in his discussion of how to avoid being overthrown in a conspiracy. In offering a calculus of the power dynamics involved in any potential conspiracy he claims:

“In short, for conspirators there are only fears of discovery or betrayal, and the dreadful prospect of punishment; but the ruler has the prestige attaching to his office, together with the laws and resources of government at his disposal, as well as help from allies, all of which will help him to survive; to which if the general goodwill of the people be added, it is impossible (impossibile) that any would be rash enough to conspire.” (1532/1988, p. 65 in Cosans & Reina, 2018)

The Prince clearly examines the relationship between moral goodness and legitimate authority and sets out principles for pursuing power, order, peace, and fortune. It also identifies freedom as an essential characteristic of a society. Free society would never allow ethnic cleansing, economic intimidation, and restriction of its fundamental rights and freedoms. Thus, in the eyes of Machiavelli, such a behaviour of the ruler (Vladimir Putin) would not be tolerated and would lead to conspiracy against him.

Conclusion

Machiavelli could consider Vladimir Putin as a perfect prince who is capable of using violence with a good and justified purpose. However, with regards to recent events and demonstrations, it is clear that Vladimir Putin is viewed very critically by the Georgian and also Russian citizens. There is not only fear but also hatred that is according to Machiavelli unacceptable source of power and reason for violence.

In the case of Georgia and the breakaway regions I proved that Vladimir Putin would not be regarded as a good Prince through Machiavelli’s lens. Military power and presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and other areas in the region would be in order to consolidate the power and could be justified. But ethnic cleansing,
economic intimidation, and psychological pressures that limit fundamental human rights and freedoms do not constitute people’s willingness to respect and honour the ruler.

As Baker (2009) stated, “Machiavelli is urging the prince to strive not just for power but for glory. Glory, however, only accrues to the virtuoso prince—the prince who is truly admirable. And admirability depends not just on what one achieves but on how one behaves. Thus, as in all coherent ethical outlooks, there is a systematic interplay between considerations of character, action and consequence.” (Baker, 2009, p. 312)

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