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JUNE 2024

CLASHING VISIONS: EXPLORING THE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF ABKHAZIA, SOUTH OSSETIA, GEORGIA, AND RUSSIA RELATIONS

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Introduction

The delicate and unstable bond between Russia and Georgia, especially concerning the unsolved question of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, originates in the dissolution of the USSR during the 1990s. On the wave of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, deeply rooted ethnic conflicts and intense nationalistic movements created the conditions for the bitter confrontation between the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Georgia. When the separatists took control over the two regions and declared independence from Tbilisi, Moscow saw an occasion to retain its influence in the post-soviet arena and decided to give crucial assistance to their secessionist claims. In this way, Russia helped to create para-state organisms, unrecognised by the international community but de facto protectorates of Moscow¹. As soon as the “hot phase” of regional hostilities came to an end during the mid-1990s, a period of constructive mediation under the aegis of the UN and the OSCE Minsk Group started to prevent further deterioration of the conflict. The Sochi Agreements of 1992, brokered by Russia, consisted of the deployment of Russian, Georgian, and North Ossetian peacekeeping contingents in South Ossetia - the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF) - followed by the creation of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) to monitor the ceasefire arrangements.

For over a decade, monitoring missions and peace accords played a key role in upholding a relatively stable situation in the region but, despite their efforts, they were unsuccessful in preventing a renewal of hostilities in 2004. The occurrence of the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia in 2003, followed by Mikhail Saakashvili's success in the presidential election in January 2004, fueled by a patriotic uprising reminiscent of similar events in the 1990s, was a game changer in the previous status quo². In his speeches, Saakashvili often invoked the necessity of rebuilding a territorially united country and, consequently, the restoration of South Ossetia and Abkhazia under Tbilisi's control was a primary concern for his party. In the meantime, the increasingly pro-Western stance of Georgia and the growing number of Western interventions

¹ Center for Eastern Studies, CES/OSW, Wojciech B. (2008). “*Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Karabakh: unfrozen conflicts between Russia and the West*”. Retrieved from <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/90010/Abkhasia%20.pdf>

² JStor, Markedonov S. (2015), “*Frozen conflicts in Europe*”, chap. “The South Ossetia conflict”. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvdf0bmg.11>

in the South Caucasus were perceived by the Kremlin as a menace to its influence. Therefore, it started to side with the separatist ambitions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as a tool in its contention with the West: in this period, hostile rhetoric and armed incidents between the parties became routine.

The events that brought Russia and Georgia to their conflict in 2008 cannot be understood without considering Georgia's misbelief that its diplomatic rapprochement and closer military-technical assistance with NATO would guarantee Georgian leadership greenlight to actions in favour of the country's reunification. Confidently believing that a violation of the peace accords would be allowed by the West to sustain Tbilisi's cause, Georgia tried to "unfreeze" the conflict by revising the format of peacekeeping and decreasing the Russian role in the area because, since 2004, Moscow evolved from the position of a peacekeeper to that of the guarantor of a secessionist entity. Russian leadership completed this evolution by recognizing South Ossetia's independence in 2008. Georgia was upset by Russia's attempts to strengthen its ties with the two regions - a challenge to the country's sovereignty - while Moscow did not see Tbilisi's ambition of joining NATO and the European Union in a good light. In the end, the conflict that burst out in August 2008 was nothing but the natural consequence of a progressive military build-up strategy and mutual mistrust between the two parties. Even though an independent EU-commissioned report confirmed the responsibility of Georgia in starting the conflict, the EU also recognized that Russia's reaction was disproportionate and took advantage of that situation to advance its goals³: with Georgia on the brink of potential NATO membership, an opportunity existed where the country had not yet entered into the collective defence agreement of the organisation, and Russia could exert control over its neighbour and showcase its military prowess in the region⁴.

After 5 days of military action, a six-point cease-fire agreement was brokered between former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his Georgian counterpart, Mikheil Saakashvili, through mediation by the European Union. In the aftermath of the war, Russia strategically

³ Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law (2009). "*Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*", Volume I, p 1-33. Retrieved from https://www.mpil.de/en/pub/publications/archive/independent_international_fact.cfm

⁴ History, Pruitt S. (2018). "*How a Five-Day War With Georgia Allowed Russia to Reassert Its Military Might*". Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/news/russia-georgia-war-military-nato>

decided to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence, crushing once again Georgia's attempt to maintain its territorial integrity.

From the very beginning, the conflict has been difficult to frame because of the different perspectives of the parties involved. For example, in President Mevdedev's speech on 8 August 2008, he argued that Russian troops had to take action to respond to Georgia's previous attack on its peacekeepers and its intervention prevented the death of thousands of South Ossetian citizens. On the contrary, Georgia still maintains that Russia has illegally invaded its territory and that it's not respecting the terms of the agreed cease-fire settlement of 2008 by making various attempts to retain influence over the two regions. Despite this official position on the Russia-Georgia war, Tbilisi witnessed a paradigmatic shift in its foreign policy from the United National Movement (UNM) to the Georgian Dream (GD) party, the current government in office. The pro-European and pro-NATO stance inherited from the Rose Revolution has been a priority in Georgia's national focus ever since, but the former GD's leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, did not hide his intention to mend the country's relationship with its northern neighbour on behalf of a strategy of "*engagement through cooperation*"⁵. As prime minister, Ivanishvili started to send signals of reconciliation to Moscow, especially from an economic and cultural perspective, while cautiously avoiding the conundrum of the secessionist regions⁶ whose legitimacy has not been acknowledged. The positions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are even more controversial, with South Ossetia assuming a more pro-Russian stance and seeing Moscow as a guarantor of security and stability, and Abkhazia, trying to adopt a pragmatic approach theoretically not excluding good neighbourly relations with Georgia as stated by de facto President of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania⁷ (although of course, Tbilisi's position regarding Abkhazia's status as an inalienable part of Georgia makes it highly unlikely), and a

⁵ Government of Georgia, State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through *Cooperation* (Tbilisi, January 2010)

⁶ PISM, Konrad Z. (2013). "*Georgian Dream's Foreign Policies: An Attempt to Change the Paradigm*". Retrieved from [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/159668/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%203%20\(51\).pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/159668/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%203%20(51).pdf)

⁷ Interpress News, "*Aslan Bzhania: We want good neighborly relations with Georgia*", February 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/129843-aslan-bzhania-we-want-good-neighborly-relations-with-georgia/>

careful attitude with Russia since it remains one of the few countries to sustain its formal independence.

16 years have passed since Russia's invasion of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but recent events have brought the Russian-Georgian conundrum back into the spotlight: the announcement in 2023 of the creation of a Russian naval base in the Bay of Ochamchire⁸ and the warnings addressed to Georgia if it keeps discussing NATO membership with the West, have reignited further tensions. These events have been internationally recognized as an alarming development given the ongoing war in Ukraine.

After providing a concise introduction on the background of the war between Moscow and Tbilisi, this report will try to shed light on, in order of appearance, Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia's narratives while analysing how these accounts convey their larger foreign policies and strategies in the South Caucasus. In the meantime, while equally considering Türkiye as a key player in this dynamic, this report will attempt to understand if there is a possible pacific solution to this sensitive context.

⁸ BBC News, Demytrie R., Brown P, (December 2023). "*Russia's new Black Sea naval base alarms Georgia*". Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67625450>

Chapter 1 - Georgian perspective

1.1 Key players in the Georgian political landscape: the United National Movement and the Georgian Dream party

Between the 2000s and now, Georgia has been dominated by two main political forces, namely the United National Movement (UNM) and the Georgian Dream (GD) party. During these two decades, their approach and strategy towards the dilemma of the secessionist regions expressed the violent contraposition of ideas of their two leaders and founders, Mikhail Saakashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili. Today, the GD still governs under the office of Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze and he seems to preserve the essence of the party's consolidated foreign policy towards Russia and the two breakaway regions.

From 2003 till the parliamentary elections of 2012, the UNM brought forward a political program based on the advancement of Georgia's integration into both the EU and NATO. The pro-Western stance defended by the party still represents a line of continuity between the UNM and the GD, while the question of South Ossetia and Abkhazia remains one of the decisive distinctions between the two political forces. The UNM's hard-line approach deteriorated the relations between Moscow and Tbilisi till the outbreak of the 5-day war in 2008, which ended with Georgia's grave defeat. When B. Ivanishvili won the parliamentary election of 2012, he accused M. Saakashvili of dragging the country into a useless and catastrophic war, losing control over the two de facto states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The recently outgoing PM, Irakli Garibashvili, claimed: *"Unfortunately, the irresponsible government of that time could not avoid this war. I have repeatedly said that if Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream had been in power in 2008, this war would not have happened"*⁹.

With the terrible human loss and military failure in the war, the pragmatic tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili considered that the crisis with Russia brought also disastrous economic effects to Tbilisi: the Russian sanctions on the nodal sectors of the Georgian economy hindered its

⁹ NewsHub, (18 December 2023). Retrieved from <https://www.newshub.ge/en/news/politics/if-ivanishvili-had-been-the-leader-of-georgia-in-2008-war-would-have-been-avoided-garibashvili>

development and affected its growth, indeed¹⁰. Furthermore, since the beginning, the founder of the GD argued that Russia is and will remain a cumbersome but unavoidable neighbour, and it's in Georgia's best interests to cultivate good relations with Moscow while trying to figure out a peaceful solution for the secessionist regions. Russia is still deemed to be the only party worthy of dealing with and in this sense, it's more useful to accommodate it rather than taking a confrontational approach¹¹. As a consequence of the GD's efforts, in 2013 Russia lifted an embargo it previously imposed on major Georgian exports that had been in place since 2006, making Russia again one of the country's main economic partners¹².

1.2 The present strategy for the secessionist regions

The Georgian government's current approach to occupied territories is outlined in the "*State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation*"¹³, initiated in 2010 during M. Saakashvili's governance and subsequently updated in 2012 by the GD. Despite the Georgian Dream officially criticising the UNM's conflict resolution policy, it aligns with the same strategy "without reservation". The key distinction between the two approaches lies in the level of assertiveness, with the previous government pursuing the policy more vigorously, while the Georgian Dream adopts a more passive and cautious stance, as mentioned above. The core of the state strategy revolves around the simultaneous implementation of two policies – *de-occupation* and *reconciliation*, along with *confidence-building* measures. Over the years, Tbilisi's Western allies and other regional actors have relentlessly pursued a non-recognition

¹⁰ Limes, De Bonis M, (2012). "*La nuova Georgia dialoga con la Russia ma non chiude con l'Occidente*". Retrieved from <https://www.limesonline.com/rubriche/le-russie-di-putin/la-nuova-georgia-dialoga-con-la-russia-ma-non-chiude-all-occidente-14727650/>

¹¹ RadioFreeEurope - RadioLiberty, Kucera J. (November 2023). "*Twenty Years After Rose Revolution, Georgia's Political Parties Hate Each Other. But They Also Largely Agree*". Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/twenty-years-rose-revolution-georgia-political-parties/32695754.html>

¹² Congressional Research Service, (updated October 17, 2019). "*Georgia: Background and US Policy*". Retrieved from <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45307/10>

¹³ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (6 May 2006). "*Georgia's State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Bridging Communities through Engagement*". Retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/05/06/georgia-s-state-strategy-on-occupied-territories-bridging-communities-through-engagement-event-3272>

policy, while confidence-building measures are still largely dominated by a logic of de-occupation and elimination of the Russian menace¹⁴. From a concrete point of view, in 2018 the GD's government under PM Giorgi Kvirikashvili announced a groundbreaking peace initiative called "*A Step Toward A Better Future*"¹⁵ to foster connections, mobility, and interactions between Georgia and the inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Under the Kvirikashvili plan, residents of the two regions will have the opportunity to transport locally produced goods to Georgian-controlled areas using labelling that doesn't denote any political status. Additionally, a novel government program will be established to support small-scale business projects in these separatist regions, for example by making products manufactured in Abkhazia and South Ossetia eligible for sale in the European Union market with a Georgian certificate of origin. This initiative aligns with the Association Agreement signed between the EU and Georgia in 2014, which entered into force in July 2016 and includes provisions for preferential trade. The Georgian initiative also introduced non-political personal identification numbers for individuals in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These identification numbers will enable them to establish businesses, engage in trade, access government programs, utilise banking services, register vehicles, and receive education from pre-school to higher levels within Georgian institutions. Under these proposals, residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will have the opportunity to attend Georgian educational institutions without the necessity of obtaining Georgian citizenship. Moreover, the government in Tbilisi is prepared to fund their university studies in the United States and the European Union.

During an interview in 2023, the current Georgian PM, Irakli Kobakhidze - chairman of the GD party - underlined the focus on appeasement that the party wishes to maintain regarding the secessionist regions: "*Our fundamental position is that the territorial integrity of Georgia must be restored only through peaceful means. We need not only the return of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (...) but also the restoration of trust with Abkhazian and Ossetian brothers and*

¹⁴ Geopolitica.info, Minora C., (2023). "*The protracted conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: interview to Elene Mindiashvili*". Retrieved from <https://www.geopolitica.info/the-protracted-conflicts-in-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-interview-to-elene-mindiashvili/>

¹⁵ UNHCR - Eurasia Daily Monitor, vol 15, Menadbe G. (April 18, 2018). "*Abkhazia and South Ossetia reject Georgia's peace plan*". Retrieved from <https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20230519101612/https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b728d236.htm>

sisters”. The GD already employed this expression of brotherhood on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the party in 2022, reinforcing the official narrative on territorial integrity and the idea of a single “civilization”: “*The Georgian Dream is expressed in two main goals for us: the first is a united Georgia, a Georgia that will peacefully return not only Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, but also our Abkhaz and Ossetian brothers and sisters*”¹⁶. As far as the context of the war in Ukraine is concerned, both PM Kobakhidze in 2023¹⁷ and President Salomé Zourabichvili, hosted by Chatham House in 2024, insisted that Georgia is focused on pursuing a pragmatic and rational peace policy rather than seeking or endorsing a second front with Russia.

1.3 The Karabakh and Ukraine War in perspective: influence on Georgian narrative

However, Tbilisi’s approach to Moscow can be further analysed by considering the context of the two major conflicts that have shaken the South Caucasus in these years: the 44-day war of Karabakh and Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. In 2020, following the confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the government adopted a neutral stance and offered to mediate in order to avoid the dreaded entrance of Russia into the conflict and the destabilisation of Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities in its territory, which represent 10% of the population. Tbilisi was most concerned about the potential exploitation of Moscow's formal support for Armenia to escalate instability within Georgia's borders and back Armenian separatist demands in Javakheti, undermining Tbilisi's territorial sovereignty in the South. Overall, among the Georgian public there is a general perception that the conflict in Karabakh does not have much in common with the conundrum of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and they are both considered

¹⁶ Intepress News, (21 April 2022). “*The political council of the Georgian Dream releases a statement regarding the 10th anniversary of the party*”. Retrieved from <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/119518-the-political-council-of-the-georgian-dream-releases-a-statement-regarding-the-10th-anniversary-of-the-party/>

¹⁷ Abkhaz World, (July 3, 2023). “*Kobadhizhe: The opposition would have entered Abkhazia and Tskhinval with tanks*”. Retrieved from <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/caucasus/2427-kobakhidze-the-opposition-would-have-entered-abkhazia-and-tskhinval-i-with-tanks>

as “hetero-directed revendications” from Moscow¹⁸. However, the purchase of new operational-tactical combat drones by the Georgian government in 2021 seems to contradict this narrative, and the Abkhazian policy-making class started to consider the possibility that Tbilisi might take inspiration from Azerbaijan’s military victory to solve the question of the secessionist regions¹⁹.

As regards the war in Ukraine, despite the obvious similarities between the 2008 invasion and the current conflict, the government has displayed an ambiguous neutrality that is out of tone considering what the country has experienced. While the administration asserts its complete adherence to financial sanctions against Russia²⁰, the economic interdependence between the two countries keeps growing: indeed, in 2023 Georgia’s GDP increased by 10.1% thanks to the intensification of Russia-Georgia financial and economic interactions²¹. For this reason, on May 18 and 19, 2023, during the Rondeli Security Conference, many security analysts expressed their concern about Russia’s increasing grip over Georgia and the fact that the country seems to have become a “*laboratory for Putin’s hybrid warfare*”²² and possibly turn into a Russian satellite due to Georgia’s conciliatory attitude. Putin does not hide its attempts to pull Tbilisi back into its sphere of influence and the GD is not apparently doing much to avoid this scenario. For example, despite facing international condemnation and massive protests from its citizens, Georgia’s government is currently pushing forward with a

¹⁸ Il Caffè Geopolitico, Scirpa I. (October 26, 2020). “*Molto da perdere, nulla da guadagnare: la Georgia e il conflitto del Karabakh*”. Retrieved from <https://ilcaffegeopolitico.net/165179/molto-da-perdere-nulla-da-guadagnare-la-georgia-e-il-conflitto-del-Karabakh>

¹⁹ JamNews, Khashig I., “Op-ed: the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict through the prism of the second Karabakh war”, December 2020. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/how-the-second-karabakh-war-will-affect-the-georgian-abkhaz-conflict-turkey-russia-georgia-abkhazia-in-al-khashig/>

²⁰ Agenda.Ge, (March 22, 2022). “*Georgia in full compliance with financial sanctions against Russia*”. Retrieved from <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2022/1011#gsc.tab=0>

²¹ Il Sole 24 Ore, (June 7, 2023). “*Dall’Armenia alla Georgia, gli Stati che stanno guadagnando dalle sanzioni con la Russia*”. Retrieved from <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/dall-armenia-georgia-stati-che-stanno-guadagnando-sanzioni-russia-AEzEVOBd>

²² Nikkei Asia, Hiroyuki A. (June 19, 2023). “*Vladimir Putin turns Georgia into a “hybrid warfare” test ground*”. Retrieved from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Vladimir-Putin-turns-Georgia-into-a-hybrid-warfare-test-ground>

controversial "foreign agent" law. This legislation is viewed as a litmus test for the nation regarding its inclination towards closer relations with Euro-Atlantic partners or remaining within Russia's sphere of influence. Opponents of the law argue that it is a Kremlin-driven initiative aimed at undermining democracy, which could jeopardise Georgia's aspirations to join the European Union. They have compared the law, named "*On the Transparency of Foreign Influence*," to a measure implemented by President Vladimir Putin in Russia, which is seen as an attempt to suppress dissent. Salome Zourabichvili, Georgia's president said that "*It is a Russian law. It is an exact duplicate of the Putin law that was adopted a few years ago and then complemented in order to crush civil society*".²³ The EU cautioned that the final approval of the bill could impede Georgia's advancement towards membership, following its initial passage.

1.4 What is the Georgian population's stance toward Russia? An analysis

The Georgian population and the government's attitude do not totally coincide when talking about the conundrum of the secessionist regions, and the relationship the country has with the Kremlin. According to the report "*Attitudes and Perceptions towards Russia in Georgia*" by the FES (Friederich-Ebert-Stiftung) in cooperation with the Rondeli Foundation²⁴ roughly half of the population have a negative opinion of the Russian state and believe that the two major obstacles to good neighbourly relations with Moscow are its attempt to bring Georgia back to its sphere of influence and the illegitimate occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The people interviewed are convinced that diplomatic ties between the two countries are not going to ameliorate as long as Putin does not restore Tbilisi's sovereignty over those territories. Additionally, 69% of the populace believe that Russian influence and propaganda play a role in pushing residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia closer to Russia; this includes pressuring them to use the Russian language and fostering economic dependence. A common belief is that people living in the breakaway regions do not necessarily want to be part of Russia, but

²³ CNN, Edwards C., Kennedy N., *Georgia presses on with Putin-style 'foreign agent' bill despite huge protests*, April 2024. Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/04/18/europe/georgia-foreign-agent-law-russia-first-reading-intl/index.html>

²⁴ FES and Rondeli Foundation, (2021). "*Attitudes and Perceptions towards Russia in Georgia*". Retrieved from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/18663.pdf>

consider the question of independence much more relevant. In conclusion, many argue that the link between Georgians and people living in the occupied territories can be re-established and that Russia constantly interferes in the region to create new conflicts and tensions in the North as well as the South Caucasus to keep the region under its influence.

Despite the differing perspectives on Russia within Georgia, a substantial majority of the younger generation aligns with the government's approach, advocating for peaceful methods to reunify separatist regions with the homeland and firmly rejecting any military resolution. While the backdrop of Russian aggression in Ukraine has naturally sparked concerns about Georgia's situation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, an overwhelming 95% of young people express their support for negotiations over the use of force. These insights are gleaned from the recent CRRC Georgia and Caucasian House Survey on Youth Civic and Political Engagement²⁵, shedding light on the prevailing sentiments and participation in peacebuilding among the country's youth. Interestingly enough, a majority of them disagreed (60%) with the statement that Georgia needed to be the first party to apologise to Abkhazians and Ossetians for war crimes committed by Tbilisi.

Regarding the ethnic cleansing and acts of violence perpetrated during the Abkhazia conflict towards local Georgians, it is worth considering the reaction of the Georgian public to the recent movie *“Liza, Go On”* (2023). The film is based on the true experience of a Georgian war reporter and it was jointly produced by Georgia and Bulgaria. The premiere of the movie in Georgian cinemas aligned with several significant occurrences: the onset of the war in Ukraine, prompting Georgia to reassess the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Abkhazia war and the developments in Karabakh, reigniting discussions on the potential military reintegration of Abkhazia. *“Betrayal”*, *“Russian Propaganda”*, and *“Insult to the Georgians”*, are just some examples of the harsh critiques that the movie received, especially by Georgian forced emigrants from Abkhazia. In particular, they accuse the film of presenting the conflict as if Abkhazians were protecting their homeland from the brutal military attack of Georgia, which considered

²⁵ OC Media, Zubashvili N., Sichinava D, (March 9, 2022). *“Young Georgians do not want a military solution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia”*. Retrieved from <https://oc-media.org/features/datablog-young-georgians-do-not-want-a-military-solution-in-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia/>

Abkhazia a simple territory to conquer. According to Tamta Mikeladze from the Social Justice Center, Georgia, the passionate and polarised reactions to the movie show that Abkhazian and Georgian societies are still not ready to discuss and confront each other constructively, to listen and reach an agreement together²⁶.

²⁶ JamNews, “Liza, Go On - A movie about the war in Abkhazia and why it caused such a strong reaction”, October 2023. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/film-go-lisa/>

Chapter 2 – Russian perspective

2.1 Kremlin's Strategy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Russia's strategy in its "near abroad"- more specifically with Georgia and the secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia - has been driven by a Eurasianist vision motivated by two primary concerns. Firstly, it fears the proliferation of democracies in its immediate vicinity, viewing democratic ideology as a potential threat that could undermine the legitimacy of its autocratic regime and lead to internal upheaval. Secondly, the Kremlin is wary of the emergence of states with robust institutional structures, defensive capabilities, and thriving economies because they are inherently challenging its influence and might resist adopting a satellite status or following the Belarusian model, which implies serving as a buffer against Western influences. For this reason, the cooperation of neighbouring countries such as Georgia with the EU and NATO has been seen as a source of "transformative change" and an imminent danger²⁷. Consequently, Moscow's primary interest was and is to discourage those states from their Euro-Atlantic integration as much as possible, and to do so, it has been using 3 main tools: military occupation, passportization, and the UN principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

The Kremlin has historically used military occupation as the primary means of exerting its authority and power over the unrecognised states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, under the vestige of peacekeeping operations. Since they declared independence in the 90's, Moscow has been exploiting them as part of a wider strategy of coercive hegemony towards Tbilisi. Since the 2000s - under Vladimir Putin's mandate - the dependency of the secessionist regions has been considered a fundamental requirement for Russia's long-term influence in the post-Soviet space, and the instrumentalization of their status is a strategy that has allowed the Kremlin to increment its leverage in the South Caucasus. Russia covers most of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's budgets and is responsible for almost the entirety of their public bureaucracies. Over the years, the linkages between Moscow and the two quasi-states have increased exponentially, especially from an economic and commercial perspective, leading to a consistent integration

²⁷ Geopolitica.info, Minori C., (September 7, 2023). "*The protracted conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: interview to Elene Mindiashvili*". Retrieved from <https://www.geopolitica.info/the-protracted-conflicts-in-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-interview-to-elene-mindiashvili/>

of their economies. Russia represents for both countries virtually the sole relevant trading partner and their relations are eased by the two regions' use of the ruble as a common currency. No other political entities in the post-Soviet space have such a unique and extensive dependency on Russia as the two breakaway regions, even if Moscow's ambitions towards them are not so different from those towards other former satellites²⁸.

From a diplomatic and political point of view, the Kremlin represented the main international interlocutor of the two regions well before the 2008 war with Tbilisi, and the fact that Russia is the only relevant country to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence has made them even more reliant on it. Before 2008, Russia deployed peacekeeping forces to Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States and this deployment was notable for its contentious practice of providing passports to residents of these two separatist regions. Indeed, the second tactic used to expand Moscow's influence in the two regions was "*passportization*"²⁹, namely the instrumental grant of Russian passports to Abkhazians and Ossetians starting from 2002-2008, which facilitated a greater degree of interconnection thanks to the concession of Russian citizenship with them. The main advantage of this tactic was the possibility of recalling the UN Principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a strategy that justified plausible raids within the two breakaway regions and then into Georgia. The circumstances provided a convenient pretext for a military buildup, prompting the development of a structural framework for Russia's instrumental utilisation of the de facto states.

2.2 Formal partnership between Russia and the secessionist regions

Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia are interrelated by several initiatives that promote a strong partnership: for example, soon after the 5-Days-War, Russia signed an "*Agreement on*

²⁸ East European Politics, Andre W. M. Gerrits & Bader M., (July 19, 2016). "*Russia's patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution*", 32:3, 297-313. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2016.1166104>

²⁹ Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Souleimanov E.A., Abrahamyan E. & Aliyev H., (October 24, 2017), "Unrecognized states as a means of coercive diplomacy? Assessing the role of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus". Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2017.1390830>

Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support” with both countries. The treaty laid the foundations for extensive cooperation between the parties involved, especially to facilitate commercial and cultural ties between them. President Medvedev stated that this agreement represented the stepping-stone for future ad hoc agreements on the most relevant fields for Russia’s national strategy, including defence, border control, anti-terrorism, financial investments, and economic development. Most importantly, the treaty contained the arrangements necessary to ensure military cooperation in case of foreign aggression, as a deterrent to Georgia’s revendications to the two de facto states³⁰.

In 2014 and 2015, Russia concluded new treaties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia respectively, promising a heightened level of integration. These agreements, particularly in light of the annexation of Crimea earlier in 2014, have drawn criticism for resembling a "de facto annexation." They entail provisions for a "coordinated foreign policy" and the establishment of a "unified space of defence and security" between Russia and the respective regions. Additionally, the treaties incorporate measures aimed at simplifying the procedures for individuals from the two regions to obtain Russian citizenship³¹.

Since 2008, with the formal recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia’s independence and the continuous military-political integration of their territories, Moscow actively aimed to impede Georgia's prospective qualification for and alignment with NATO and the European Union. The Sochi negotiations in 1992 under Russia’s patronage, created the foundations for the presence of its peacekeeping forces in the territory. This situation created a rational justification for its interference in the internal affairs of the two regions and, until 2008, the two populations were dependent on Russia for their security. The opportunity provided by the Sochi Agreement to deploy Russian military forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia granted a strategic advantage over Georgia and made it vulnerable to further manipulations. However, Russia's involvement with the breakaway regions is not solely confined to diplomatic or

³⁰ President Of Russia, “Statements following the Signing of the Treaties on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia”, September 17, 2008. Retrieved from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1436>

³¹ East European Politics, Andre W. M. Gerrits & Bader M., (July 19, 2016). “*Russia’s patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution*”, 32:3, 297-313. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2016.1166104>

economic realms but it also encompasses technical and social aspects. The majority of political elites in the former Union Republics received an education in Russian universities, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not an exception. For example, in Abkhazia among the top 19 individuals occupying key positions within the executive branch (including the Head of State and cabinet ministers), a significant majority (12 individuals) have pursued their education either in post-Soviet Russia or the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Furthermore, many Abkhazian and Ossetian functionaries have completed their studies at Russian Institutes of higher education³². At the same time, the educational system reflects the political priorities of the de facto government. While schools offering instruction in Russian, Abkhaz, and Armenian usually function without disruption, Georgian-language schools in Gali have been undergoing changes since 2015, shifting towards Russian instruction. In September 2021, teaching in Georgian was banned in Abkhazia, though it still remains taught as a foreign language in numerous schools in the predominantly Georgian eastern areas.³³ In general, social linkages between Russia and the two de facto states are encouraged by the common use of Russian as a “*lingua franca*”, at the expense of the Abkhaz and Ossetian languages. Indeed, for many Russian citizens, the two regions represent the principal tourist destination because they benefit from a visa-free travel regime.

2.3 How the war in Ukraine changed Moscow’s narrative on the two de facto states

Over the years and especially in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russian officials have often employed a kind of rhetoric that appealed to a possible integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within the Union State, a supranational entity composed of Russia and Belarus created in 1999, which foresees an enlarged commonwealth that blurs the post-Soviet borders among its members. The expansionist turn that Vladimir Putin’s regime adopted has raised further questions and a renewed interest in its possible implications regarding the South

³² East European Politics, Andre W. M. Gerrits & Bader M., (July 19, 2016). “*Russia’s patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution*”, 32:3, 297-313. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2016.1166104>

³³ Freedom House - Abkhazia, “*Freedom in the World 2022*”, 2022. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/country/abkhazia/freedom-world/2022>

Caucasus. Aslan Bzhania, the head of administration of Abkhazia, argued that “*After the Russian Federation successfully completes the Special Military Operation on the territory of Ukraine, there will be a completely different reality*” and that “*a certain outline of the Union State will be created. We are counting on this, and we are ready to take part in this*”³⁴. As Putin’s imperialist ambitions grew, debates over the possible annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have become more frequent and are a sign of Moscow’s Eurasionist and post-Soviet retaliatory policy.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, there has been a notable increase in the frequency of working visits between the Abkhazian administration and Moscow. On October 5, 2023, the de facto leadership of Abkhazia disclosed plans for the establishment of a permanent Russian naval base within Abkhazia, signalling the Kremlin's enduring strategic concern for Abkhazia's Black Sea coastline. Aslan Bzhania stated “*This is all aimed at increasing the level of defence capability of both Russia and Abkhazia, and this kind of interaction will continue*”³⁵. However, Russian-Georgian relations pose another challenge to the formation of a Union State encompassing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Given the recent rapprochement between Moscow and Tbilisi, exemplified by Georgia's decision not to impose sanctions on Russia and the resumption of commercial flights between the two nations, the annexation of Abkhazia or South Ossetia into Russia or a Union State would undermine the recent cooperative efforts. For this reason, Putin might be reticent to explicitly provoke Georgia with a call for the regions to join the Union State; however, this would not be the first time for Russia to take advantage of the unstable situation in the South Caucasus to favour its interests, and violating Georgia’s territorial integrity through the annexation of the two regions could empower Moscow.

³⁴ Caspian Policy Center, Castillo N., “*The Russians Want To Build a Super-State. It May Now Include Parts of Georgia*”, (November 16, 2023). Retrieved from <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/georgia/the-russians-want-to-build-a-super-state-it-may-now-include-parts-of-georgia>

³⁵ Reuters, Faulconbridge G., “*Russia plans naval base in Abkhazia, triggering criticism from Georgia*”, (October 5, 2023). Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-plans-naval-base-black-sea-coast-breakaway-georgian-region-izvestiya-2023-10-05/>

2.4 Russia's instrumental use of peacekeeping operations in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Karabakh

Moscow's peacekeeping operations in Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia are motivated by one of the core principles of Russia's foreign policy: the non-intervention of foreign powers in its soft underbelly, the South Caucasus, a historical region of Russian influence and hegemony. Since the collapse of the URSS, the Kremlin has shown characteristics of the syndrome of the "besieged fortress", perceiving itself as girded by enemies, first among all NATO and the Western world, but recently also by a new key player in the South Caucasus, Turkey. The affirmation of peacekeeping operations in the region was considered by Russian policymakers an effective instrument to prevent any form of interference in its backyard, sometimes with more or less success³⁶.

Russia's interventions in these two regions can hardly be understood in the conventional definition of "peacekeeping operations", since Moscow has repeatedly demonstrated how these missions are instrumental for attaining Russian geopolitical ends and is not a traditional mediator in these conflicts. The Kremlin, especially in the context of Georgia's war, is not interested in generating concrete security, but in creating a context of controlled instability, favourable to its goals. In Karabakh, the Trilateral Statement of 2020 - formally endorsed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia - seemed to exemplify an increase of Russia's influence since it unequivocally designated Moscow as the singular authority responsible for peacekeeping operations and mission control, with a deployment of nearly 2000 peacekeeping soldiers to monitor the area³⁷. However, in April of this year, the Kremlin announced the withdrawal of its troops in Karabakh, following Azerbaijan's successful offensive in the contested territory in September 2023. The lack of military support for Armenia during both the 2020 Second Karabakh War and Baku's aggression - despite the common membership in the CSTO - put Russia's long-standing alliance with Armenia at risk. Armenia now seeks to diversify its

³⁶ Research Gate, Miholjic N., "*Role of Russia's Peacekeeping Missions in its Foreign Policy toward the South Caucasus*", July 2022. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362192811_Role_of_Russia's_Peacekeeping_Missions_in_its_Foreign_Policy_toward_the_South_Caucasus

³⁷ ISPI Dossier, Ambrosetti Tafuro E., "*Peacekeeping: the Russian Way*", November 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/peacekeeping-russian-way-32227>

economic and diplomatic relations, feeling that it can no longer rely on its "big brother"; moreover, as Russia's influence declines, there has been a notable shift in its relationship with Azerbaijan. Presently, Moscow finds itself increasingly reliant on Baku (and Ankara) to sustain open trade routes and secure access to partners beyond the region. This transformation signifies a departure from the conventional power dynamics, with Russia now leaning on Azerbaijan more than the other way around and a weaker grip on Yerevan³⁸.

In the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, at first, Russia tried to rely solely on its peacekeeping mandate in the two secessionist regions, but as soon as it recognized the ineffectiveness of such a measure, it quickly switched to a more violent approach, resulting in a full-fledged war. Then, the conditions of the ceasefire agreement negotiated in 2008 officially granted Moscow the possibility of stationing its army in the territory and employing further instruments to guarantee peace representing a further step towards a more consolidated position³⁹.

2.5 How can Turkey change Russia's game of influence in the South Caucasus?

Russia's strategy and manoeuvring in the South Caucasus, specifically with Georgia and the secessionist regions, would not be fully understood without considering its "*conflictual cooperation*" with the other fundamental protagonist of its near abroad: Turkey. As the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated in October 2020 with the Radio Station Sputnik "*Turkey never qualified as our strategic ally. It is a partner, a very close partner. In many sectors, this partnership is of strategic nature*".⁴⁰ In their relationship, there are key elements of

³⁸ Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies, Von Essen H., Hedenskog J., "*Russia Announces the Total Withdrawal of Its Troops From Karabakh*", April 2024. Retrieved from <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/russia-announces-the-total-withdrawal-of-its-troops-from-Karabakh/>

³⁹ Research Gate, Miholjic N., "*Role of Russia's Peacekeeping Missions in its Foreign Policy toward the South Caucasus*", July 2022. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362192811_Role_of_Russia's_Peacekeeping_Missions_in_i

⁴⁰ Small Wars and Insurgencies, Cheterian V., "*Friend and Foe: Russia-Turkey relations before and after the war in Ukraine*", 34:7, 1271-1294, February 2023. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2185443>

convergence that have promoted a synergic cooperation between them, but also fundamental contrasts that can still test the feasibility of their linkage.

Both countries have in common a mutual desire to preclude any kind of foreign interference in their area of regional hegemony in Asia, and ambition to see their geopolitical position recognized in the present multipolar world. This common ideological basis has been fundamental in developing a “pragmatic relationship”, nourished through a direct dialogue between the leaders Vladimir Putin, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan⁴¹; Moscow and Ankara appear to share a mutual comprehension of each other’s ambitious and opportunistic approaches to foreign policy and their risk-aversion attitude has prevented hard-line collisions over time. Moreover, their expectations and perspectives on their geopolitical reality seem to match, contributing once more to a respectful but naturally antagonistic relationship⁴². Turkey’s increasing interest in assuming a major posture in the South Caucasus since 1991 tests this connection daily, and makes it an unavoidable and inconvenient competitor in Russia’s sphere of influence. The two countries represent indeed the fundamental regional powers of the South Caucasus based on a set of historical, cultural, and ethnic factors, even though Moscow has undeniably a privileged position in it. Nonetheless, Ankara’s attempts to gain additional leverage in Russia’s “soft underbelly” through programs such as the Middle Corridor - which connects Eurasia to Europe while sidestepping Russia’s Northern Corridor - and the Organization of Turkic States - which includes Turkish-speaking countries such as Azerbaijan under its influence - could drive its pragmatic cooperation with Russia to an impasse.

2.5.1 Developments in Turkey’s relations with Georgia

If considering Turkey’s relationship with Georgia and the secessionist regions, the picture becomes even more complex. The bond between Turkey and Georgia persists as one of the most intimate ones in the region, characterised by robust trade, economic, and diplomatic

⁴¹ International Organisations Research Journal, Başaran A., Orkun A., “*The Evolution of Russian-Turkish Relations: Ideational Convergence and Pragmatic Cooperation*”, vol. 18, no 3, 2023. Retrieved from <https://avesis.ankara.edu.tr/yayin/abfdd360-0c54-4494-9ba2-32cb8b82b8ca/the-evolution-of-russian-turkish-relations-ideational-convergence-and-pragmatic-cooperation>

⁴² European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Sinikukka S., Fire and Ice - The Russian Turkish Partnership, “*Russia and Turkey in the Post-Soviet Neighbourhood, Uneasy Tango*”, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34006.7>

relations. Following Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, Turkey has become Georgia's primary trading ally and a major source of investment, promoted by the 2008 Free Trade Agreement between the two countries, which has led to an external trade volume of \$1.6 billion in 2020⁴³. Since 2015, Ankara's strategic partnership with Georgia involves energy, infrastructure, and military endeavours, the key foundations for the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey (AGT) collaboration. The latter witnessed a dynamic evolution since the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) crude oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) natural gas pipeline, completing the Southern Gas Corridor that crosses the Caspian Sea till Southern Italy.⁴⁴ Their partnership in the military sector is focused on joint military drills and the modernization of Georgia's armed forces⁴⁵. However, the progressive developments of their collaboration have often been defined by Turkey's relation with Russia and the West: due to Turkey's historical hesitation towards the presence of NATO or the US in the Black Sea, it voiced concerns regarding Georgia's accession plans during the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit, despite historically supporting Georgian territorial integrity and being seen by the Georgian Dream party as a key partner for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration⁴⁶. Then, following the eruption of the crisis with Russia in November 2015, Turkey emerged as a staunch advocate for Georgia's NATO accession. During the Warsaw Summit of April 2016, when NATO made the decision to investigate potential avenues for enhancing its presence in the Black Sea region, President Erdogan, departing from Turkey's typical position, openly

⁴³ RUSI, Seskuria N., “*Targeting Turkish-Georgian Relations: Russian Disinformation is Taking a Local Turn*”, May 2021. Retrieved from <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/targeting-turkish-georgian-relations-russian-disinformation-taking-local-turn>

⁴⁴ European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Sinikukka S., Fire and Ice - The Russian Turkish Partnership, “*Russia and Turkey in the Post-Soviet Neighbourhood, Uneasy Tango*”, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34006.7>

⁴⁵ SWP Comments, German Institute of International Affairs, Weiss A., Zabanova Y., “*Georgia and Abkhazia Caught between Turkey and Russia*”, December 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/georgia-and-abkhazia-caught-between-turkey-and-russia>

⁴⁶ SWP Comments, German Institute of International Affairs, Weiss A., Zabanova Y., “*Georgia and Abkhazia Caught between Turkey and Russia*”, December 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/georgia-and-abkhazia-caught-between-turkey-and-russia>

advocated for the presence of NATO forces in the Black Sea by arguing that Russia's annexation of Crimea was transforming the Black Sea into a "*Russian lake*"⁴⁷

However, in 2023, Turkey's ambivalence towards NATO and Western influence in the Black Sea appeared again, when the Turkish navy commander asserted that Turkey possesses the capability to ensure security in the Black Sea independently and expressed a lack of desire for US or NATO presence in the region by stating "*NATO is trying to take some measures in the Black Sea. However, we declare that we will take these measures in the Black Sea ourselves and that we do not want NATO or America in the Black Sea*"⁴⁸. Furthermore, the 1936 Montreux Convention gives Ankara the concrete possibility of blocking warship transit and de facto control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, making Turkey a vital player in the Black Sea.

2.5.2 Russia-Turkey dynamics in the South Caucasus

Russia and Turkey's stances in the South Caucasus are deeply antithetical: on the one hand, Moscow is a historic ally of Armenia - a formal member of the CSTO - it supports the quest for the independence of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia and tries to reverse pro-Western feelings in Georgia through propaganda. On the other hand, Ankara supports Azerbaijan and, despite Turkey's non-recognition of the breakaway regions and the enduring trade and transportation embargo imposed since 1996, the sizeable and structured Abkhaz diaspora from Turkey has bypassed legal constraints by engaging in trade and investment within the republic, tacitly allowed by Russia. Consequently, Turkey contributes approximately 18% to Abkhazia's overall trade volume, ranking second only to Moscow⁴⁹. Since 2014, the trade and economic ties between Turkey and Abkhazia have experienced significant growth, especially thanks to the active engagement and lobbying efforts of Abkhaz diaspora community residing in Ankara

⁴⁷ Ibidem

⁴⁸ Turkish Minute, "*Turkey does not want US or NATO presence in the Black Sea: navy commander*", November 2023. Retrieved from <https://turkishminute.com/2023/11/18/turkey-does-want-us-nato-presence-the-black-sea-navy-commander/>

⁴⁹ SWP Comments, German Institute of International Affairs, Weiss A., Zabanova Y., "*Georgia and Abkhazia Caught between Turkey and Russia*", December 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/georgia-and-abkhazia-caught-between-turkey-and-russia>

which played a significant role in advocating for the restoration of transit links and the strengthening of economic-political relations with Abkhazia. Gathering precise data on the exact volume of trade between Abkhazia and Turkey continues to pose challenges, as those involved in commercial activities are reluctant to disclose information due to legal apprehensions. However, research conducted by Abkhaz economist Beslan Baratelia suggests that Turkey accounts for roughly 60 percent of Abkhazia's imports and receives about 45 percent of its exports. This data underscores Turkey's significant economic relationship with Abkhazia. Additionally, before Russia's substantial investments and the increase in Turkish trade, customs duties from trade with Turkey comprised around 30 percent of Abkhazia's government budget in 2007.⁵⁰

Despite strong and consolidated trade relations, in 2016 Abkhazia did not hesitate to align with Russia's sanctions on Turkey as the result of the Ankara-Moscow crisis of the same year. The restrictions regarded mainly imports of Turkish primary goods as well as the involvement of Turkish firms in infrastructure investment ventures, supported by Russian financing. The Abkhaz authorities cited Article 4 of the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership with Russia (2014) as the basis for implementing these restrictive measures. The Abkhaz officials implemented these sanctions with the intention of minimising detrimental effects on the Turkish economy. Notably, the sanctions did not specifically target significant import categories from Turkey, as construction materials, fuel, or textiles⁵¹.

Besides the direct sanctions imposed by Abkhazia, Russia's decision to reinstate the visa requirement for Turkish citizens starting from January 1, 2016, has posed a barrier to diaspora members' interactions with their homeland. Diaspora Abkhaz individuals from Turkey holding Abkhaz passports are unaffected by changes in visa regulations, capable of exiting Turkey with Turkish passports and entering Russia with Abkhaz passports due to Russia's recognition of

⁵⁰ Heinrich Boll Stiftung - Tbilisi, Clayton N., "*What is Turkey doing in Abkhazia?*", January 2014. Retrieved from <https://ge.boell.org/en/2014/01/16/what-turkey-doing-abkhazia>

⁵¹ SWP Comments, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Weiss A., Zabanova Y., "*Georgia and Abkhazia Caught between Turkey and Russia*", December 2016. Retrieved from https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2016C54_wis_zbv.pdf

Abkhazia. This may increase demand for Abkhaz passports among diaspora members with regular ties to Abkhazia.

Despite the resilience of social and economic relations between Turkey and Abkhazia, the Russian-Turkish crisis had a notable impact. Tensions and uncertainties from the crisis have reduced incentives for Turkish investors to enter Abkhazia's market. Russian visa requirements for Turks hinder business and social exchanges, and though Abkhaz sanctions were minimally implemented, they raised transaction costs. In the wake of the Russia-Turkey crisis, the Abkhaz diaspora community was deeply concerned, officially stating its loyalty to the Turkish government, yet refrained from criticising Russia directly.⁵²

After observing the deepness but also controversies of Abkhazia-Turkey relation, it is still noteworthy to consider that Ankara's economic engagement pales in comparison to the extensive investments and business connections facilitated by the Kremlin, especially following the August war and Russia's acknowledgment of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent entities. Moscow has allocated significant funds, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars, for the enhancement of Abkhazia's economy and public bureaucracy. In addition, a source within the Abkhaz Ministry of Foreign Affairs, speaking on the condition of anonymity, conveyed the frustration of the de facto Abkhaz government regarding Turkey's apparent prioritisation on fostering self-serving economic relations while avoiding formal recognition and official diplomatic ties⁵³.

2.5.3 How the Second Karabakh war influenced Russia-Turkey relations

The true game-changer in Russian-Turkish relations was the Second Karabakh War in 2020: surprisingly enough, Moscow did not take concrete steps to defend its ally Armenia, despite its membership in the Russian-sponsored CSTO, while Turkey did not hesitate in providing Azerbaijan with weapons, active military commanding and conscription of Syrian and Islamist

⁵² Ibidem

⁵³ Heinrich Boll Stiftung - Tbilisi, Clayton N., "*What is Turkey doing in Abkhazia?*", January 2014. Retrieved from <https://ge.boell.org/en/2014/01/16/what-turkey-doing-abkhazia>

mercenaries⁵⁴. It goes without saying that without Turkey's crucial intervention, the fate of the war would have been extremely different.

Ankara's decisive intervention stems from two primary motives: firstly, to assert independence from Western powers within the peace negotiation frameworks in Karabakh, and secondly, to enhance its strategic position amidst geopolitical competition with Russia and Iran⁵⁵. Following the conflict's resolution, facilitated by Russia's accommodating approach toward Turkey, Ankara secured a pivotal role within the monitoring centre established in Azerbaijan (it has been recently shut following the withdrawal of the Russian peacekeeping mission). This development granted Ankara newfound influence in overseeing Karabakh, thereby advocating for a 2+2 format centred around the Russia-Armenia and Turkey-Azerbaijan axes instead of the OSCE Minsk Group format⁵⁶. In conclusion, from Russia's perspective, Turkey proves to be a potentially dangerous neighbour that might put at risk its geopolitical strategy in Georgia and the secessionist regions. Ankara's general pro-Western stance, even though it does not wish to see extra-regional intervention in Asia, and support for Georgia's cause represents a thorn in Russia's side, meant to last in the near future.

⁵⁴ Small Wars and Insurgencies, Cheterian V., "*Friend and Foe: Russia-Turkey relations before and after the war in Ukraine*", 34:7, 1271-1294, February 2023. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2185443>

⁵⁵ Ibidem

⁵⁶ European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Sinikukka S., *Fire and Ice - The Russian Turkish Partnership*, "*Russia and Turkey in the Post-Soviet Neighbourhood, Uneasy Tango*", 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34006.7>

Chapter 3 - Abkhazia and South Ossetia's perspectives

3.1 Abkhazia and South Ossetia: An Introduction

Even though Abkhazia and South Ossetia hold a modest position on the global geopolitical chessboard owing to their small economies, lack of widespread international recognition, and low-to-zero foreign investments, they assume a newfound significance within the foreign policy agendas of both Russia and Georgia, as well as within the broader framework of the South Caucasus. As previously observed, the dynamics that link the two secessionist regions with Moscow and Tbilisi are controversial and multi-layered, balancing independentist ambitions with more cautious and pragmatic considerations.

When examining their relationships with their two neighbouring states, significant disparities emerge in their respective narratives, showing different strategies and goals for their future. With populations of 244,000⁵⁷ and 56,520⁵⁸ in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively, the two regions enjoy formal recognition only from five UN members, namely Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Syria, making their relations with the rest of the international community particularly challenging. The 2022 outburst of the war in Ukraine has brought the position of the two regions back to the spotlight, prompting speculation about the roles they might assume in Russia's broader ambitions within the post-Soviet sphere.

3.2. Abkhazia and Russia: a complex client-patron pattern

Abkhazia's relationship with Russia embodies the classic characteristics of a client-patron dynamic: marked by a high level of asymmetrical dependency that ensures the region's economic survival, alongside a robust political alignment with the benefactor. Furthermore, Moscow is the core provider of Abkhazia's military security, and without its recognition of

⁵⁷ BBC News, "Abkhazia Profile", August 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18175030>

⁵⁸ BBC News, "South Ossetia Profile", August 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18269210#:~:text=South%20Ossetia%20is%20inhabited%20mostly,collapse%20of%20the%20Soviet%20Union.>

independence, the de facto state would lose any concrete possibility of advancing its quest for autonomy.

From an economic perspective, the Abkhazian market depends almost exclusively on Russia's financial support, which amounts to many billions of rubles each year. Since 2008, trade and foreign investments have been nearly non-existent due to the lack of recognition by a large part of the international community. Consequently, Russia represents the only relevant economic partner of the region and their cooperation has been officialized through a series of treaties such as the 2009 *Agreement on the Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of Investments* and the 2012 *Agreement on the Regime of Trade in Goods*⁵⁹. The very prelude to the 2012 deal says that the purpose was to create “a single market of goods, services, capital and labour” and the significant rise of Abkhazia's foreign trade in years following Russia's recognition proves the success of this partnership⁶⁰. However, despite the undeniable weight of Russia's patronage on Abkhazia, the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum of 2023 presented Abkhazia with an opportunity to forge economic cooperation with the United Arab Emirates; on that occasion, Foreign Minister Inal Ardzimba underscored Abkhazia's willingness to facilitate investment and economic collaboration with the UAE⁶¹. In the meantime, many locals in Abkhazia hope for China to become a key economic player in the region: the de facto state has a desperate need for investment for its development and independence, and Chinese companies have shown a keen interest in food items, products ripe for local manufacturing and export to China. Particularly, the wine sector has caught their eye, given its popularity among China's middle class. Nonetheless, investments mostly lean towards small-scale ventures, suggesting limited Chinese influence in the near future. Moreover, China's intervention in Abkhazia is likely to be hampered by Beijing's economic and diplomatic relations with Georgia, enhanced by the

⁵⁹ Eurasian Geography and Economics, Blakkisrud H., Kemoklidze N., Gelashvili T. & Kolstø P., “Navigating de facto statehood: trade, trust, and agency in Abkhazia's external economic relations”, 2020. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1861957>

⁶⁰ Ibidem

⁶¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia, “*The Republic of Abkhazia will establish investment and economic relations with the United Arab Emirates*”, June 2023. Retrieved from <http://mfaapsny.org/en/allnews/news/othernews/respublika-abkhaziya-budet-nalazhivat-investitsionno-ekonomicheskie-svyazi-s-obedinennymi-arabskimi-/>

2017 Free Trade Agreement between the two countries. Consequently, even though China could represent an intriguing variable in the life of the breakaway regions, it is still premature to predict which trajectory it might take⁶².

Moscow has demonstrated reservations concerning several aspects of its economic and political relation with Abkhazia: Russian entrepreneurs have often criticised Abkhazian suboptimal business environment, complaining about often second-thought changes by the region as in the Rosneft deal in 2009⁶³. Russian businessmen have started indeed to be reluctant to provide financial investments to the “predatory elites⁶⁴” in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, characterised by increasing corruption and unpredictability. Moreover, Russia remains frustrated by its denied access to Abkhazia’s real estate market, interpreting it as a lack of reciprocity from the Abkhazians; to foster better relations between the two parties, Russia considers ensuring equal access to properties vital. For these reasons, following a meeting convened by Abkhazia’s leader Aslan Bzhania in 2023, it was disclosed that the funding ceiling for 2023-2025 - as per the decision of the Russian-Abkhazian intergovernmental commission - will be 3.6 billion rubles (below \$40 million). This marks a reduction from the previous Russian investment program financing limit of 4.05 billion rubles for the same period, indicating a decrease of 450 million rubles (approximately \$4.8 million)⁶⁵. This announcement was preceded in 2022 by Russian Federation Ambassador to Abkhazia, Mikhail Shurgalin, indicating that the failure to ratify the agreement on transferring the Pitsunda estate to Russia by the republic's parliament could lead to the departure of Russian military forces from

⁶² Eurasianet, Kieran P., “*Abkhazia: Is Chinese Investment a Panacea or a Pipe Dream?*”, September 2017. Retrieved from <https://eurasianet.org/abkhazia-is-chinese-investment-a-panacea-or-a-pipe-dream>

⁶³ Kolstø P., “*Biting the hand that feeds them? Abkhazia–Russia client–patron relations, Post-Soviet Affairs*”, 36:2, 140-158 (2020). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2020.1712987>

⁶⁴ Caucasus Watch, “*For Abkhazia and South Ossetia Security with Russia Equals Economic Troubles*”, April 2022. Retrieved from <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/for-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-security-with-russia-equals-economic-troubles.html>

⁶⁵ IPN - Interpress News, “*Moscow reduces funding for occupied Abkhazia by 450 million rubles*”, November 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/127988-moscow-reduces-funding-for-occupied-abkhazia-by-450-million-rubles/>

Abkhazia. Additionally, all investment initiatives, including the revival of the Sukhumi airport and railway repair projects, could be abandoned⁶⁶.

In order to preserve Russian investments in the country, in December 2023, Aslan Bzhania signed a contentious agreement with Moscow, transferring the disputed Black Sea resort to Russia with a rent of 49 years. This decision, ratified by Abkhazia's de facto parliament in an overnight session, triggered spontaneous protests, labelled by Russian politicians as being externally instigated. However, Konstantin Zatulin, First Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee on CIS Affairs, emphasised that there was never any intention within Russia to annex the Abkhaz land or detach any part of Abkhazia from itself. *“This is not about Russia laying claim to Abkhaz territories, but about legally recognizing a known fact: the buildings and facilities of the state dacha in Pitsunda, built during Soviet times from the union budget and exclusively used by Russia. It's about finally incorporating this into Abkhaz legislation”*⁶⁷, he said. Meanwhile, the Georgian Foreign Ministry denounced the agreement to transfer the holiday home complex to Russia, labelling it as *“another illegal act”* and part of Russia's ongoing policy of occupying Georgia's integral regions⁶⁸. But the Abkhazian population holds a different stance on the issue: as stated by Naira Amalia, member of the opposition Asny party, Abkhazians are against the transfer of land and are convinced that the leadership's actions have contravened laws and the constitution.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, the 2022 elections in Abkhazia reconfirmed the de facto president Bzhania with a parliamentary majority with only three opposition deputies. This data holds significant consequences for Abkhazia's future attitude

⁶⁶ JamNews, *“Russia may stop investing in Abkhazia and close military base if not given Pitsunda estate”*, August 2022. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/russia-will-stop-investing-in-abkhazia-and-close-the-military-base-if-it-is-not-given-pitsunda/>

⁶⁷ Abkhaz World, *“Russian Politicians: Protests in Abkhazia “Fueled from the Outside”*, December 2023. Retrieved from <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/current-affairs/2641-russian-politicians-protests-in-abkhazia-fueled-from-the-outside>

⁶⁸ RadioFreeLiberty, *“Abkhazia OKs Handing State Resort Over To Russia, Triggering Protests”*, December 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-abkhazia-state-resort-russia-/32749083.html>

⁶⁹ JamNews, *“Russia may stop investing in Abkhazia and close military base if not given Pitsunda estate”*, 2022. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/russia-will-stop-investing-in-abkhazia-and-close-the-military-base-if-it-is-not-given-pitsunda/>

towards Russia, and many local analysts caution that the president's unparalleled influence on parliament might diminish Abkhazia's ability to withstand pressure from Russia, as demonstrated by the aforementioned contentious Pitsunda Estate question.⁷⁰

Another controversial topic in the Russia-Abkhazia relations has been the plans for the restoration of the Babushera airport, located near the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi. In October 2023, Abkhazia started a partnership deal with Infrastructure Development, a newly founded Russian company, offering exceptionally favourable investment terms. The goal is to rejuvenate operations at the airport, identified as a pivotal initiative set to elevate Abkhazia's economy. Russia will supervise the works and the restart of air traffic; however, the recent project has sparked concerns about the possibility of further visits by Russian officials to Abkhazia. Georgia could not but consider it as an additional step towards annexation, and Vakhtang Kolbaia, former deputy speaker of the Georgian parliament, argued that Putin is unlikely to pursue the formal incorporation of Abkhazia into the Russian Federation, but instead opts for its de facto integration into the 'Russian world.'⁷¹

On the other hand, the de facto state shows several concerns about its relationship with Russia: since the signature of the 2008 bilateral agreement *On Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Support*, Abkhazia found itself deeper and deeper interconnected with Russian politics and economics, producing a preoccupying level of dependency. Additionally, the 2014 treaty *On Alliance and Strategic Partnership*, devised by the Kremlin to deepen integration, acted as a wake-up call for the secessionist region. While ostensibly affirming Abkhazia's absolute sovereignty, it subtly suggested that "*Russia would exert control over all facets of our existence.*"⁷². These concerns explain why Sergei Shamba, the Secretary of the Security

⁷⁰ The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, Baranec T., Gasviani T., "*So-called parliamentary elections in occupied Abkhazia*", July 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13723-so-called-parliamentary-elections-in-occupied-abkhazia.html>

⁷¹ Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Menabde G, "*Russia's Restoration of Sukhumi Airport May Lead to Full Annexation of Abkhazia*", November 2023. Retrieved from <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-restoration-of-sukhumi-airport-may-lead-to-full-annexation-of-abkhazia/>

⁷² Kolstø P., "*Biting the hand that feeds them? Abkhazia–Russia client–patron relations, Post-Soviet Affairs*", 36:2, 140-158 (2020). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2020.1712987>

Council of Abkhazia, responded to Dmitri Medvedev's assertion regarding the potential formal alignment of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia with Russia by arguing that while Abkhazia indeed looks to strengthen ties with Moscow, it remains receptive to other bilateral relationships, exemplified by the efforts made with the Abkhazia-UAE economic cooperation initiative.⁷³ Russia is a key but hazardous partner and Abkhazia recognises the necessity of diversification in the diplomatic network.

At the end of the day, Abkhazia's authorities have found themselves in a catch-22 situation: from the government's perspective, the Russian Federation is a precious source of investments and a prosperous market, virtually the only one to which it has full unimpeded access; however, this entails the constant threat of being monopolised by Russian economy due to the large asymmetry of size and power between the two⁷⁴. Furthermore, the fact that the vast majority of the population holds Russian passports and citizenships, along with the prevalence of Russian-language programs in most Abkhazian schools under the transition plan of 2015⁷⁵, creates a reliance that goes beyond the simple economy.

3.3 Prioritizing necessity over true enthusiasm: Abkhazia's political support to Russia

The initiatives and conjoint projects that Abkhazia keeps maintaining with Russia are driven more by necessity rather than true ideological compliance. At the end of the day, Moscow has been selected as a strategic partner primarily due to the absence of alternative options to fulfil

⁷³ Abkhaz World, "*Abkhazia: Seeking Alliance but Standing Apart from Russian Federation*", 2023. Retrieved from <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/current-affairs/2484-abkhazia-seeking-alliance-but-standing-apart-from-russian-federation>

⁷⁴ Eurasian Geography and Economics, Blakkisrud H., Kemoklidze N., Gelashvili T. &

Kolstø P., "Navigating de facto statehood: trade, trust, and agency in Abkhazia's external economic relations", 2020. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1861957>

⁷⁵ JamNews, Kotova M., Partzvania S., "*Is Georgian language banned in Abkhaz schools?*", November 2021. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/is-georgian-language-banned-in-abkhaz-schools/>

that role; not only Russia is Abkhazia's patron and main security provider but, without its support, the region's quest for international recognition would be more gruelling⁷⁶.

Consequently, it is not surprising that Abkhazia's official narrative strongly backs Russia's political leadership. In the recent Russian presidential election, President Aslan Bzhanya ensured that all Russian citizens residing in Abkhazia could participate in the voting process, setting up over 30 polling stations across the de facto state. The government openly expressed its support for Vladimir Putin's regime, with the President himself stating that the people of Abkhazia had '*great respect and sympathy*' for Putin⁷⁷. In general, both the current executive and the opposition seem to be on the same page when it comes to the country's relations with Russia. However, the recent proposal of the "foreign agent" law, which mirrors the one already in place in the Russian Federation and supported by Aslan Bzhanya, has caused some rifts in this unity. Another example of alignment between Abkhazian officials and Russia is represented by the troubling rise in the tactics of repression and intimidation directed at NGOs, their affiliates, accused of being Western-driven and an instrument to advance Western goals in the area. This escalation has reached alarming levels, with dissenters encountering heightened scrutiny, state-run media spreading malicious misinformation about them, and a deliberate effort to silence their voices within mainstream media platforms⁷⁸. Accusations against Western-led programmes can be traced also in the statement by Inal Ardzimba, the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Abkhazia, arguing that the US State Department and the EU are trying to maintain Abkhazia under "aggressive isolation" citing their actions regarding content removal from the USAID website related to reducing Kremlin's influence and "de-occupation of Abkhazia." The UNDP's Partnership for Resilience Program is also accused of creating instability within the political landscape of the Republic of Abkhazia. For these

⁷⁶ "Biting the hand that feeds them? Abkhazia–Russia client–patron relations, *Post-Soviet Affairs*", 36:2, 140-158 (2020). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2020.1712987>

⁷⁷ OC Media, "*Competing to be most pro-Russian: Abkhazia prepares for Russian presidential election*", March 2024. Retrieved from <https://oc-media.org/features/abkhazia-prepares-for-russian-presidential-elections/>

⁷⁸ Abkhaz World, "*The Sputnik Sham: How Propaganda Undermines Abkhazian NGOs*", 2024. Retrieved from <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/current-affairs/2683-the-sputnik-sham-how-propaganda-undermines-abkhazian-ngos>

reasons, the Foreign Minister demanded clarification on the objectives of projects funded by the USAID, suspended the approval of new UNDP projects and declared John Pennell, head of the USAID mission in the South Caucasus, *persona non grata* in Abkhazia.⁷⁹

Nonetheless, despite the President's allegation of public unity, opinion varies considerably among Abkhazia's population, especially following several controversies regarding Russia's role in the region. Along with the controversial foreign agent law that would put at risk Abkhazia's civil society, the relocation of the Pitsunda Dacha to Russia and the possibility of laws prompting easier access for Russia to Abkhazia's properties has fostered new controversies⁸⁰. Younger generations seem to be particularly strongly opposed to the current Russian government and when questioned about their decision to abstain from or oppose the current president, they mentioned their disapproval of Russia's intervention in Ukraine and their aspiration for progress in Abkhazia⁸¹. However, the 2025 presidential elections in Abkhazia are likely to confirm the present trend of the government.

3.3 A stronger desire for reunification: the case of South Ossetia

While both Abkhazia and South Ossetia exhibit a client-patron relationship with Russia, the latter appears to have reached an even higher level of dependency. The degree of financial grants that the country receives has already exceeded that of Abkhazia and it is meant to continue in the future. Moreover, despite being deeply interconnected with Moscow from an economic as well as political point of view, Abkhazia has displayed greater reluctance towards the prospect of potential annexation to Russia, whereas South Ossetia appears to embrace this possibility eagerly. How is it possible to explain this qualitative difference between the two regions' approaches?

⁷⁹ Abkhaz World, "*UNDP and MFA Abkhazia Exchange Statements on Resilience Programme*", 2024. Retrieved from <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/current-affairs/2703-undp-and-mfa-abkhazia-exchange-statements-on-resilience-programme>

⁸⁰ OC Media, "*Competing to be most pro-Russian: Abkhazia prepares for Russian presidential election*", March 2024. Retrieved from <https://oc-media.org/features/abkhazia-prepares-for-russian-presidential-elections/>

⁸¹ *Ibidem*

The ethnic consciousness factor has considerable consequences on this question: following the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic Abkhazians, constituting less than 18% of the population in the Abkhazian ASSR, faced a sense of survival trauma. However, since gaining independence, they have worked to rebuild their demographic and political influence, perceiving their nation's survival as dependent on having their own state. On the other hand, the mainland for South Ossetians lies in North Ossetia, not the South. Therefore, they desire reunification with their fellow North Ossetian compatriots, and annexation to Russia would fulfil this aspiration⁸². For this reason, the 2014 agreement *On Alliance and Strategic Partnership* with South Ossetia preserved the word “integration” (*integratsiya*) whereas the Abkhazians fought hard to get it eliminated in their draft⁸³.

From an economic point of view, South Ossetia relies entirely on the Russian Federation for the provision of essential goods, including food and industrial products. According to Igor Kochiev, former Foreign Policy and Inter-Parliamentary Relations Committee Chairman of South Ossetia, “*We had every opportunity to develop the economy. But for all these years, the leadership has not taken a single real step, obviously, failed projects were supported which cost hundreds of millions of rubles, some incomprehensible schemes were implemented through economic projects (...)*”⁸⁴. Furthermore, the Russia-South Ossetia funding program for 2023-2025 amounting to more than 3.5 billion rubles (about \$40 million), finalised to buildings, social amenities, and infrastructures⁸⁵ seems to confirm the future region’s inextricable dependency on Moscow and it is unlikely to see South Ossetia capable of developing a self-standing market.

While Abkhazia expresses concerns about the risks associated with overdependence on its patron, South Ossetia seems to warmly embrace Russian support as it is possible to infer from Alan Gagloev’s words, President of South Ossetia “*We can count on the constant help of*

⁸² Kolstø P., “*Biting the hand that feeds them? Abkhazia–Russia client–patron relations, Post-Soviet Affairs*”, 36:2, 140-158 (2020). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2020.1712987>

⁸³ Ibidem

⁸⁴ JamNews, Zhanna T., “*How South Ossetia may whether sanctions on Russia*”, February 2023. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/south-ossetia-and-russian-sanctions/>

⁸⁵ Ibidem

Russian friends”⁸⁶. The desire for annexation with Moscow can also be traced in the confirmation by local authorities of Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev's statement on how South Ossetia could potentially be unified with Russia⁸⁷. Another key evidence of the region’s possible future within the Russian Federation can be found in the words of the breakaway region’s parliament speaker Alan Aborov on a possible referendum to join Russia “*We are discussing all these issues in close coordination with Russia, taking into account our bilateral relations and treaties*”⁸⁸.

Lastly, according to Igor Kochiev, the general mood of the South Ossetian population is particularly favourable towards the chance of annexation: the 2022 referendum on the same topic was positively received and considered an opportunity to join the “North Ossetian brothers”⁸⁹.

3.4 Navigating Opportunities and Challenges in the Georgia Relationship Amidst the Ukrainian Conflict

3.4.1 Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s visions of Georgia

The two breakaway regions have important differences in their vision of a peaceful relation with Georgia. Abkhazia’s President Aslan Bzhania considers the development of friendly and productive linkages with Georgia as vital and, on more than one occasion, he has shown a positive opinion of Tbilisi’s leadership. For example, regarding the war in Ukraine, he stated that the government “*Has shown a pragmatic approach to all the matters*” and “*The repeated calls from the Ukrainian leadership to open a second front did not find support from them. I*

⁸⁶ Ibidem

⁸⁷ JamNews, Zhanna T., “*South Ossetia wants to become part of Russia, local politicians say*”, August 2023. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/south-ossetia-could-join-russia/>

⁸⁸ RadioLiberty, “*Georgia’s South Ossetia Reportedly Discusses Possible Inclusion Into Russia*”, March 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-ossetia-join-russia/32864980.html>

⁸⁹ JamNews, Zhanna T., “*South Ossetia to join Russia after all?*”, February 2023. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/south-ossetia-and-russia/>

consider this a sign of political maturity”⁹⁰. Additionally, he argued that the Georgian people feel no animosity towards the Abkhazians, and Abkhazia’s resentment is directed towards those responsible for initiating the Georgian-Abkhaz war in the early 1990s, rather than towards the current government. Lastly, during an interview with the Russian media outlet “*Argumenty i Fakty*”, aif.ru, the President addressed the prospect of the region achieving peace with Georgia saying “*Someday, probably, this will happen. And we would even like this to happen in the near future*”⁹¹.

South Ossetia’s position is more severe compared to Abkhazia. For instance, former Foreign Minister Dmitry Medoiev argued that “*No one believes the statements of Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashili about Tbilisi’s desire to return “brothers – Abkhazians and South Ossetians” peacefully.*”⁹². The region appears to be more sceptical about the feasibility of good neighbour relations with Georgia and the context of the war in Ukraine has shown once more the unwavering support South Ossetia intends to provide Russia. In 2014, the de facto state recognized the two breakaway Ukrainian areas of Donetsk and Lugansk - while Abkhazia has done it only recently - and during a celebration on 23 February 2022, President Bibilov reemphasized the accusations made by Putin against NATO⁹³. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have assured their political support to the Russian Military Operation and, according to Aslan Bzhania, Ukraine is currently attempting to broaden the conflict and engage other parties to sustain its cause and destabilise Russia. However, he is steadfast in saying that

⁹⁰ Jamnews, “*President of Abkhazia: Georgian leadership must acknowledge existing reality*”, February 2024. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/abkhazias-presidents-interview-for-itar-tass-bzhania/>

⁹¹ Civil Georgia, “*De-Facto Leader of Occupied Abkhazia Talks Relations with Tbilisi, Moscow with Russian Media*”, April 2024. Retrieved from <https://civil.ge/archives/589838>

⁹² JamNews, Zhanna T., “*South Ossetia wants to become part of Russia, local politicians say*”, August 2023. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/south-ossetia-could-join-russia/>

⁹³ Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso - Transeuropa, Lorusso M., “*War in Ukraine: reactions from the South Caucasus*”, February 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Ukraine/War-in-Ukraine-reactions-from-the-South-Caucasus-216133>

Abkhazia and Russia represent a united front and the de facto state is working towards reinforcing its own military capability.

3.4.2 *The war in Ukraine: developments in Russia-Abkhazia-Georgia relations*

The announcement of the construction of a permanent naval base in the district of Ochamchire on the Black Sea Coast and Russia's plans to deploy a segment of its Black Sea navy in the separatist region of Abkhazia could escalate tensions between Russia and Ukraine, bringing the conflict perilously close to Georgia. While Georgia has managed to address the security threats and to release tensions with Russia, the evolving dynamics of the conflict are heightening Tbilisi concerns about being caught in the crossfire⁹⁴. As soon as the Ukrainian army destroyed most of Moscow's Black Sea fleet, the Russian Federation was forced to step back from the west of the Black Sea, altering the security and commercial balance of the area. Ukraine's successful missile strikes targeting the Russian navy have made Crimea an inhospitable operating zone for Russia. Allegations suggest that warships in Ochamchire could be involved in attacks on Ukrainian civilians, making them potential targets for the Ukrainian military. While the port may not accommodate Russia's largest battleships, it can support smaller vessels for resupply and logistics.⁹⁵ The base is located in a region internationally recognized as being part of Georgia, and Ukraine might not be willing to bring Tbilisi - an EU candidate - amid the conflict⁹⁶. Consequently, it might be used as a shelter from Russian forces and new attacks could be launched from Georgian territory to Ukraine. Tbilisi has expressed great concerns about the initiative, considering it another assertive action to maintain Moscow's grip on the breakaway regions, especially after Bzhanias statement on the construction of the base and the possible engagement of Abkhazia in the Union State with

⁹⁴ Geopolitical Monitor, Chkhaidze N., "*Trade and Geopolitics Behind Plans for Russian Naval Base in Abkhazia*", January 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/trade-and-geopolitics-fueling-russias-naval-base-in-abkhazia/>

⁹⁵ Ibidem

⁹⁶ Caspian Policy Center, Castillo N., "*Russia On the Back Foot in the Black Sea: Implications for Georgia and the Caspian Region*", January 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/regional-south-caucasus/russia-on-the-back-foot-in-the-black-sea-implications-for-georgia-and-the-caspian-region>

Russia and Belarus⁹⁷. Maintaining a consistent Russian naval presence in Abkhazia could transform the region into an additional theatre of operations or a flexible reserve, potentially extending the conflict beyond Ukraine and possibly involving Georgia. Moreover, the port guarantees the Kremlin a new economic leverage in the Black Sea, influencing the construction of the Anaklia project under Georgia's mandate, capable of increasing regional connectivity and regarded as a crucial node within the scope of expanding the Middle Corridor project⁹⁸. Furthermore, since the beginning of the conflict, Russia has been supported by transit trade through Abkhazia which has increased significantly: cargo - especially of coal - from Russia reaches Abkhazian ports by rail and is usually transported to Turkey. This road is also used in the opposite direction, from Turkey to Russia, which allows Moscow to circumvent Western sanctions and maintain commercial links⁹⁹.

From Abkhazia's point of view, despite the creation of the Ochamchire port and the guarantees of military security from Russia, the war in Ukraine still represents a concerning development due to the unprecedented economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia, given the separatists' heavy reliance on financial support from Moscow¹⁰⁰. In a condition of economic hardship and isolation from the global financial system Moscow is likely to cut on the fundings for Abkhazia and South Ossetia's development. However, in Abkhazia, there is concern over being seen as merely a "Russian province" despite a desire for a "strategic partnership" with Russia. Separatists exhibit caution towards the Union State of Russia and Belarus project, raising questions about Abkhazia's willingness to sacrifice its cherished independence for

⁹⁷ Civil Georgia, "*Bzhania Readies to Host the Russian Navy, Wants to Join the Union State*", October 2023. Retrieved from <https://civil.ge/archives/562121>

⁹⁸ Geopolitical Monitor, Chkhaidze N., "*Trade and Geopolitics Behind Plans for Russian Naval Base in Abkhazia*", January 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/trade-and-geopolitics-fueling-russias-naval-base-in-abkhazia/>

⁹⁹ JamNews, "*Volume of Turkish-Russian cargo transportation via Abkhazia triples amid Russia-Ukraine war*", June 2022. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/volume-of-turkish-russian-cargo-transportation-via-abkhazia-triples-amid-russia-ukraine-war/>

¹⁰⁰ Topchubashov Center, Hasanov S., "*In the shadow of the Ukraine war: what's next for Abkhazia?*", December 2023. Retrieved from <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3591/in-the-shadow-of-the-ukraine-war-whats-next-for-abkhazia>

Kremlin dictates. Indeed, President Bzhania stated in March 2023 that it is premature to discuss joining the Union State, citing Abkhazia's non-invitation as the official rationale¹⁰¹.

3.4.3 Georgia seeks a rapprochement with Abkhazia

In December 2022, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated that the breakaway Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia possesses significant potential “for turning into another Monaco and Abkhazian capital Sukhumi - into the new Monte Carlo”.¹⁰² The Prime Minister also conveyed a message of reconciliation towards Abkhazia, stressing the importance of peace, an end to conflict, and the vision of a unified, European Georgia. In the case of unification, Georgia could invest about \$10 billion in the first three years in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; however, the lack of response from the Abkhazian government can be attributed to Moscow's close observation of Sukhumi's reactions in such situations. Abkhazia relies entirely on Russia for its economic, financial, and military-political requirements and cannot jeopardise its relations with Moscow¹⁰³. According to the popular and influential Abkhazian journalist, Inal Khashig, Georgia should first consider repealing the law "On the occupied territories," before putting forward eccentric proposals such as “creating Monaco”. While it is improbable for Abkhazians to acquiesce, it may lead to a shift in their perception of Georgia¹⁰⁴.

The war in Ukraine has created a new framework for Georgia’s cooperation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Dependent on Russian support, the economic prospects of the two de facto states are expected to decline due to heavy Western sanctions on Moscow. Any financial assistance from Moscow will come with stringent conditions as a submission to Russia’s request to have access to Abkhazia’s real estate market, potentially compromising the region’s autonomy.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem

¹⁰² The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Menabde G., “Will Abkhazia Become the ‘Georgian Monaco?’”, January 2023. Retrieved from <https://jamestown.org/program/will-abkhazia-become-the-georgian-monaco/>

¹⁰³ The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Menabde G., “Will Abkhazia Become the ‘Georgian Monaco?’”, January 2023. Retrieved from <https://jamestown.org/program/will-abkhazia-become-the-georgian-monaco/>

¹⁰⁴ JamNews, Khasig I., ““End law on occupation, don't offer Monaco” - a comment from Abkhazia”, December 2022. Retrieved from <https://jam-news.net/abkhazian-reaction-to-comments-by-georgian-pm/>

Meanwhile, Moscow has signalled reduced willingness to financially support both regions, urging them to become more self-reliant. Unlike Abkhazia, South Ossetia lacks significant resources to offer Russia, leading to occasional attempts to seek unification. Looking ahead, both regions face challenges amid Russia's crisis, potentially sparking discussions in Abkhazia about economic cooperation with Tbilisi¹⁰⁵. The Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania has long supported trade and diplomatic dialogue with Tbilisi, even though other political parties have demonstrated steadfast opposition to this scenario. Some precedent exists in this regard: prior to 2020, and notably in the aftermath of the pandemic, Georgia's healthcare services have drawn considerable interest from residents of these two regions. Likewise, the education sector, supported by diverse state-sponsored incentives, has attracted a significant number of prospective students¹⁰⁶ making Tbilisi more appealing to average Abkhazians and Ossetians.

¹⁰⁵ Caucasus Watch, “*For Abkhazia and South Ossetia Security with Russia Equals Economic Troubles*”, April 2022. Retrieved from <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/for-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-security-with-russia-equals-economic-troubles.html>

¹⁰⁶ Caucasus Watch, “*For Abkhazia and South Ossetia Security with Russia Equals Economic Troubles*”, April 2022. Retrieved from <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/for-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-security-with-russia-equals-economic-troubles.html>

Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate political and economic interplay among Russia, Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia since the 1990s have been part of a complex “boom and bust cycle”, marked by considerable ebbs and downs. Nowadays, Georgia, under the guidance of the pro-Russian Georgian Dream party, is undertaking the path toward European integration, aiming to loosen Russia's grip and expand its diplomatic and economic network. Yet, Tbilisi's true intentions toward its neighbour remain shrouded in debate, especially given recent events such as the Foreign Agent Law, mirrored in Abkhazia, signalling Moscow's enduring influence in both nations' policy-making spheres. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, tensions have escalated, with Georgia and Russia at odds over various issues, including Russia's establishment of a permanent naval base in Ochamchire, efforts to revitalise Sukhumi airport, and the transfer of the Pitsunda Estate to Russian control. These developments have been interpreted by Tbilisi as part of a broader scheme aimed at uniting the secessionist regions with Moscow, while Georgia's overtures to "South Ossetian and Abkhazian brothers" to return to Tbilisi, promising economic investments, have fallen on deaf ears. Surprisingly enough, on many of these contentions, Abkhazia's public opinion has expressed a divergent position to that of the government, signalling the existence of a strong opposition as demonstrated by the protests that followed each of these announcements. Navigating between economic reliance on Russia and seeking political autonomy, Abkhazia cautiously explores new avenues for independence, as demonstrated by interesting trade relations forged with the UAE at the St. Petersburg Forum and the still unripe China's interest in the region. Moreover, the historic ties with Turkey, fostered by the Abkhazian diaspora, remain integral to Abkhazia's diplomatic and economic fabric. In the meantime, South Ossetia seems inclined to embrace closer integration with Russia, viewing it as an opportunity to reunite with their North Ossetian compatriots. Turkey is another fundamental variable to take into consideration while analysing the future developments of the two de-facto states, since it has substantial influence in the area and possess the diplomatic and economic tenure to make the difference in Russia's geostrategic calculations. The trajectory of the relationship among the four countries hinges significantly on the unfolding of the conflict in Ukraine and Moscow's capacity to maintain its longstanding role as a guarantor and benefactor in the region. Any erosion of its political sway could pave the way for the interference of new actors and prompt these nations to pivot towards alternative partnerships.



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