

**The Conflict Prolonging Factors:  
The Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian Cases**

**Çatışmayı Uzatan Faktörler:  
Gürcü-Abhazya ve Gürcü-Osetya Örnekleri**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation focuses on the ethnic separatist conflicts within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia: the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian cases. Recognizing that the prolongation of these two conflicts has been a major obstacle for the stability and development of the region, this paper has particularly aimed to analyze a multitude of factors driving the entrenchment of the impasse in their peace processes. The study of the ‘conflict prolonging factors’<sup>i</sup> has been the groundwork for progressively examining the context within which the conflicts have evolved and identifying the causal explanations behind the ensuing stalemate. In particular, this paper has intended to discover and specify the external and internal actors, as well as their motives and objectives which have accumulated to hinder or delay the settlement of the conflicts. Moreover, it is acknowledged that external players, most notably Russia, have been more powerful than internal players in affecting the parameters that determine the course of the conflicts. That is to say, the concrete analysis of the dynamics and forces that tend to sustain the conflicts will provide an insight for understanding the lack of progress towards resolution in these two specific cases.

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<sup>i</sup> For a comprehensive account on the use of this term, as well as on its origin, see *infra* footnote 8.

## Özet

Bu tez, Gürcistan'ın uluslararası tanınmış sınırları dahilindeki etnik ayrılıkçı çatışmalara, Gürcü- Abhazya ve Gürcü- Osetya vakalarına, odaklanmıştır. Bu makale, bu iki çatışmanın uzamasının bölgenin istikrarına ve gelişimine başlıca engel olduğunu görerek, Abhazya ve Güney Osetya barış süreçlerindeki açmazları kuvvetlendiren faktörleri analiz etmeyi amaçlamıştır. 'Çatışmayı uzatan faktörler' üstünde yapılan derinlemesine çalışma, bu çatışmaların zaman içerisindeki gelişimlerini gerçekleştirdikleri bağlamların incelenmesi ve sonunda ortaya çıkan açmazların ardındaki nedensel açıklamaların tanımlanması için zemin oluşturmuştur. Bilhassa, bu makale, bu iki örnek olaydaki içsel ve dışsal aktörleri ve bununla beraber bu çatışmaların sona ermesini engelleyecek veya geciktirecek şekilde sentezlenen bu önemli aktörlerin amaçlarını ve dürtülerini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Dahası, dış aktörlerin, özellikle de Rusya'nın, çatışmaların seyrini belirleyen parametrelere etkilerinin iç aktörlerden daha güçlü olduğu kabul edilmiştir. Çatışmaların sürmesine neden olan dinamikler ve kuvvetlerin somut analizi, bu iki özel vakada çözüme yönelik ilerlemenin eksikliğine ilişkin içsel bir anlayış sağlayacaklardır.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

<b>ASSR</b>	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
<b>CFE Treaty</b>	Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty
<b>CIS</b>	The Commonwealth of Independent States
<b>CPF</b>	Conflict prolonging factor
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUMM</b>	European Union Monitoring Mission
<b>EUSR</b>	European Union Special Representative
<b>FoG</b>	Friends of Georgia
<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced person
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>OSCE</b>	The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>SSR</b>	Soviet Socialist Republic
<b>START</b>	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
<b>TSFSR</b>	Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Federation
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNHCR</b>	The United Nations Refugee Agency
<b>UNOMIG</b>	United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia
<b>UNPO</b>	Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation
<b>UN SC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



## 1. Introduction

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was remarkably peaceful, however as the newly-emerging states based their independence on the rejection of the central Soviet power, some autonomous entities with different titular nationalities revolted against their parent states. Thus, post-Soviet Eurasia was gravely hit by numerous conflicts that emerged as a territorial struggle by two competing populations. In particular, Georgia has been the most troublesome republic in South Caucasus, facing with two separatist regions<sup>1</sup> and a loss over one fifth of its territory. The existence of these breakaway states has been a major impediment to reform and development not only in Georgia, but in the whole region, since the on-going conflicts have had negative consequences on the functioning of the region's security complex. Hence, every observer concludes that a stable system requires the peaceful settlement of these conflicts and a final resolution for the status of the breakaway regions. However, the latest events of August 2008 revealed that such a resolution process is fraught with difficulty.

In 8 August 2008, Russian tanks and artillery from its 58<sup>th</sup> army marched across its southern border into Tskhinvali, the capital of the breakaway state-let of South Ossetia. This move was preceded by the decision taken in the Security Council of Kremlin following Georgia's incursion into the area and alleged Russian air strikes on Georgian targets the night before. Observers had little doubt that the Georgian side had planned a military offensive in an attempt to increase or maybe even to regain its control over South Ossetia. Supporting South Ossetia in its fight against Georgia and claiming a right to intervene in order to avoid Georgian troops attacking Russian peacekeepers and civilians,<sup>2</sup> Russia showed its readiness to indulge in an open conflict with its neighbor. Georgian retreat followed as Russian troops

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<sup>1</sup> Following the collapse of the SU, four breakaway states emerged along with fifteen recognized states, namely Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria (which split from Moldova) and Nagorno Karabakh (which split from Azerbaijan.)

<sup>2</sup> "Russian Troops and Tanks Pour into South Ossetia," 9 August 2008, The Guardian. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/09/russia.georgia>

took control of Tskhinvali and constantly bombed Georgian villages surrounding the city. The crisis further escalated as Russia sent paratroopers and armoured vehicles not only into the tiny enclave of South Ossetia, but also to the another breakaway Georgian province of Abkhazia. As Georgia failed to respond militarily, Abkhazia seized the moment to expand its territorial control over the mountainous Kodori Gorge, a small, but strategically significant enclave in north-eastern Abkhazia inhabited by ethnic Georgians.<sup>3</sup>

Taking into account the disastrous circumstances of such a move, the real initiative of Saakashvili still remains elusive. In the face of a disproportionate Russian counter-attack, Georgia must have realized that achieving an advantageous resolution for its break-away enclaves who have been for long impairing its territorial integrity and sovereignty would be increasingly difficult. This short, but bloody war manifested the fragile situation in the region as the conflict reached to its zenith since the wars of early 1990s in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet federation. More importantly, it portrayed that Russia has been more eager to keep its control and power over its traditional sphere of influence inherited from Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union.

What is more, as the two neighbors came on the edge of a full-scale war, an atmosphere of panic erupted in the international arena. By glancing at a map, one can easily understand why the international community<sup>4</sup> has been suddenly so concerned about the recent developments in Georgia. Due to its proximity to the oil rich and strategically important regions of Central Asia and the Caspian Basin, Georgia, has long been a focal point of attention for the Great Powers. However, until this last outburst, Georgia's conflict with its

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<sup>3</sup> "Russia takes control of South Ossetian capital after Georgian retreat," 10 August 2008, guardian.co.uk "Russian Forces Capture Military Base in Georgia," 12 August 2008, NYTimes, Hearst, D. "Dangerous proxy war gains an international dimension," 9 August 2008, *The Guardian*

<sup>4</sup> It is recognized that the term 'international community' is used vaguely in international relations. In this paper, it refers to a general term that includes all governments, which are widely recognized by the others, as well as all groups and organizations formed by these governments. The use of this term bears significance in this study as it reflects the common norms, values and understanding by the member states of the international arena.

separatist regions had been largely ignored by these powers, which instead chose to focus on the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan during the 1990s and 2000s. Bearing the hallmarks of a resurgence of the hard line Russian posture and resurfacing the reflections and implications of these regional conflicts on international politics, this ‘five-day’ war has achieved to reignite heated debates across the globe about the future of the region and of Georgia, in particular.

### **1.1 General Introduction of the Conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia**

At the time the Soviet Union dissolved, the Georgian Republic had three autonomous entities: Abkhazian ASSR, the Ajarian ASSR and the South Ossetia Autonomous Oblast. Since the last years of the Soviet rule, the nationalist policies of the Georgian state together with the national and regional aspirations of the autonomous regions have contributed to the separatist tendencies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, reopening past wounds. Mobilizing their own ethnic populations in the face of a new unitary Georgian state, Abkhazians and Ossetians began to demand broader autonomy and ultimately outright secession. In that context, the process of ‘Georgianization of Georgia’ in the early 1990s was very much related to the emergence of contestation over these break-away regions. Following the two violent conflicts that broke out between them and the Georgian center in the early 1990s, low-intensity skirmishes flared up sporadically, but nevertheless a large-scale war was ultimately avoided for fifteen years.

Throughout the last decades, not only Georgian attitude, but also the mentality of the separatist authorities and of Russia was instrumental in polarizing the conflict and maintaining the longstanding status quo. The status quo, as defined in this paper, is the state of existing conditions due to the lack of major alterations in the statuses of the *de facto* states and in the course of the peace processes. In August 2008, the dynamics driving the conflicts have ultimately transcended into a new phase which effectively thwarted the already fragile peace process and destroyed the nearly 16 year old status-quo as Georgia descended into a

war in South Ossetia for the second time, but this time confronting Russia as its major enemy. Russia's direct involvement in the struggle of these separatist regions for the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union manifested that change was underway.

The Georgian-Russian war in South Ossetia that spilled over to Abkhazia made it clear that the prospect of a high-intense conflict was present and indeed awaiting for ignition. Before the war, the absence of large-scale fighting in Abkhazia and South Ossetia for almost sixteen years had generated a misleading image that a level of stability was preserved in the course of the conflicts. Similarly, the existence of the separatist conflicts in these regions had not threatened the international security until the last Russian-Georgian confrontation and consequently the international community had chosen to label them as 'frozen conflicts'. As a matter of fact, the conflicts were for long host to a chaotic stalemate in which periodic clashes were erupting, producing a cycle of violence. To elaborate, although these separatist regions were not involved in a large-scale war from the early 1990s until the war of August 2008, they were still witnessing a number of fierce incidents, such as sporadic fighting, kidnappings, murders and military maneuvering. Some analysts recognized these regions' vulnerability to dangerous outbursts of violence, asserting that they experienced prolonged periods of '*uneasy peace*' or in other words '*precarious stability*'.<sup>5</sup>

It is significant to note that Abkhazia always had remained in danger of ensuing violence since the war in 1992. On the other hand, in South Ossetia, until the relatively large-scale fighting in 2004, a level of stability had been present, increasing the hopes for a sustainable peace in the region. However, as the existing stability was broken down in the summer of 2004, South Ossetia as well had become susceptible to a serious acceleration of violence. Without a doubt, the nature of the protracted conflicts in these two cases

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<sup>5</sup> Hunter, S. T. (2006). "Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past", SAIS Review, 15:1, pp. 120.

perpetuated a high level of instability and insecurity, making the regions vulnerable to a continuous violence. Hence, in both of these cases, the conditions were already ripe for escalation in the summer of 2008 when Russian and Georgian forces directly faced up to each other within the *de facto* borders of South Ossetia.

It is remarkable in hindsight that the international community failed to recognize that the forces behind these conflicts were dynamic and constantly developing. Essentially, it is not only enough to understand why these conflicts emerged at the very beginning, but also to comprehend the evolving nature of the underlying forces behind these conflicts and thus to analyze how it impedes their peaceful resolution. Thus, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the break-away regions that lie on Georgia's border with Russia, require closer scrutiny. To elaborate, this paper will aim to illustrate that the conflicts in Georgia should not be viewed in isolation, but a complete picture can only be achieved when a complex web of factors, which drive the continuation of the conflicts, are taken into account. That is to say, all major players and their underlying patterns of interaction as well as already established structural factors have combined to hinder the conflict resolution process.

## **1.2 General Introduction of the Players Involved**

The conflicts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have experienced the involvement of a multitude of players, not only the parties siding to the conflict, but also the ones that have sought to influence the parties in the conflict resolution process. The contradictory interests of all these participating players have accumulated for the conflicts' prolongation, ultimately impeding the achievement of a lasting peace in the region. In essence, more or less all key actors have perceived their own interests inextricably linked to the persistence of the impasse in the peace processes as the conflict has evolved to a zero-sum game where gains for one party are considered to be losses for the other. Thus, a mutually acceptable settlement seems far from attainable, especially when considering the clashing interests and lack of willingness

displayed by the key players. It also holds true that some actors are more influential and powerful than others in affecting the parameters that determine the course of the conflict.

To begin with, Georgia can be attributed with the lion's share of responsibility for the original phases of a struggle that has recently developed to a dynamic deadlock that underpins the relations between the country and its separatist regions. This does not necessarily mean that Georgia is solely responsible for the current situation but rather represents only one piece of a larger puzzle. The Georgian side has been adamant to subside to Abkhazian and South Ossetian demands simply because this would translate to a substantial loss of territory. Moreover, the existence of approximately 200,000 Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to forced migration from Abkhazia remains one of the key factors plaguing the conflict resolution process as Georgia does not wish to resort to a compromise that excludes the demands of these IDPs. In their part, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have showed few signs of willingness to negotiate over the re-distribution of power in their territories, since they have been reluctant to concede authority on the regions which they fought to acquire and won with painstaking struggle. Though these breakaway states have desired to gain the recognition of the international community, their main objective has been to maintain their survival which under current conditions has been guaranteed by the preservation of the deadlock in the peace processes.

In addition to the directly engaged parties of the conflict, Georgians and many of the observers believe that Russia played a key role in consolidating the status quo *ante*<sup>6</sup> for almost two decades and thus preventing the resolution of the conflict. In both Abkhazian and Ossetian cases, Russia's strategic policies that aim to withhold both Georgia and its separatist regions under its influence have become invariably intertwined with the on-going conflicts. It is not a secret that for their survival, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been heavily

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<sup>6</sup> Status quo *ante* here refers to the state of conditions that were present before the war. It is recognized that with the war in August 2008, the long-standing status quo is destroyed, bringing out changes in the statuses of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in the context of their conflicts and peace processes.

dependent on Russian support. Eager to challenge Georgia, the break-away states historically have looked for ‘protection’ from Russia, the former Soviet center and neighboring state. On the other hand, Russia for years sent mixed signals to Georgia, in a clear effort to avoid the total break-down in their relations, executing a dual power game to retain control over the region.

Additionally significant, the increasing geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus region has attracted the attention of other external powers, such as various international organizations and more importantly the United States, which is fundamentally incompatible with Russian aspirations. Furthermore, apart from these major political powers, North Caucasus people has also secured their roles in this power game by providing support and legitimacy to the contested *de facto* states of Georgia. In brief, it can be seen that the fact that both Georgia and its break-away states have continued to seek support from outside powers to empower their positions has further complicated the issue. In the absence of a final political solution, a complex web of overlapping players have found space to maneuver the conflict according to self-interested aspirations, consolidating the continuity of the power struggle in the region and the maintenance of the contemporary conflictual situation.

### **1.3 Introducing the Content of the Study**

The research question for this study is: “Why Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts have been protracted for almost two decades?” Drawing upon this research question, this study aims to analyze the dynamics and forces driving the continuation of these two conflicts. In this vein, the purpose of this paper is to study the relation between the peace processes<sup>7</sup> and a large array of historical, economic, political and cultural factors that impede or delay these processes in the Abkhazian and South Ossetian cases. These factors are labeled as ‘conflict

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout the paper, sometimes it is called as conflict resolution process. These concepts are further operationalized in the Chapters (2.3) and (2.4).

prolonging factors' (CPF), as originally identified by Andreas Mehler.<sup>8</sup> To elaborate, the so-called conflict prolonging factors refer in this study to a multitude of factors which tend to sustain the conflicts. Recognizing that these two conflicts have been entrenched for almost two decades, this paper intends to find out the structural and interactive dynamics, as well as the external and internal actors, which have substantial impact on the duration of these conflicts. It is claimed that the existence of various and highly intertwined CPFs have been a major impediment to the peaceful resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Thus, it is significant to identify the key factors that account for the current stalemate in the course of these two conflicts, as well as to examine the level of intensity of these specific CPFs. In this regard, this project produces high volume of research and commentary.

In order to make the analysis of CPFs more straightforward, they are first categorized on the basis of the duration of their endurance, as well as their openness to change. The long-term CPFs are the historical and structural factors that have been rooted in the core of the conflicts and have created deeply-entrenched cleavages and animosities between the adversary parties. The short-term CPFs are those underlying features, which have been shaped within the political, economic and geo-political context concomitant to the progress of the conflicts. In this light, the short-term CPFs are the ones which are open to constant evolution, whereas the long-term CPFs are inherently less amenable to alteration. Second, the short-term conflict prolonging factors are divided as 'internal' and 'external' dynamics. Internal

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<sup>8</sup> In this paper, the use of the term 'conflict prolonging factors' is inspired by Andreas Mehler's works. Mehler in his working paper titled "Major Flaws in Conflict Prevention Policies towards Africa" introduces the concept of 'conflict prolonging factors'. He defines them as a number of factors that "contribute to the predominance of logics of war over logics of peace after an escalation of violence has taken place." See Mehler, A. (June 2005). "Major Flaws in Conflict Prevention Policies towards Africa," working paper published by German Overseas Institute (DÜI), pp. 8. Available at [www.duel.de/workingpapers](http://www.duel.de/workingpapers). Mehler stresses out the significance of changing the peace research focus from analyzing 'root causes' of the conflicts to the factors which tend to sustain the conflicts. He claims that the nature of the conflicts in Africa change over time as new factors and actors are added. Thus, he concludes that in order to understand why these conflicts are so enduring, the specific factors behind these conflicts' continuation should be analyzed. See also Mehler, A. (2006). "Area Studies, Conflicts and Preventive Practice in Africa," in P. Chabal (ed.) *Is Violence Inevitable in Africa?: Theories of Conflicts and Approaches to Conflict Prevention*, Leiden, NLD: Brill, N. H. E. J. , N. V. Koninklijke, Boekhandel en Drukkerij, pp. 105-106.



dynamics include the roles of the domestic players, namely Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On the other hand, external dynamics include the outside actors such as Russia, the United States, NATO and international organizations, most notably UN and OSCE, as well as the impact of the international law. This study accepts the fact that there have been many other players involved in the course of Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts, but the ones which are examined throughout the paper are the key players which have contributed to the current deadlock in the peace processes.

In particular, the specific roles of the external and internal players provide the largest portion of the CPFs to be evaluated. It is claimed in this paper that a wide range of players have directly or indirectly obstructed the conflict resolution processes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A partial explanation for this is that some members of the parties involved have had continuing interests in the maintenance of the conflicts. Thus, they have pursued actions with the intent to hinder or delay the peace processes. Besides, it also holds true that some other actors have unintentionally spoiled the peace processes, since their motives have somehow added to the insoluble characteristic of the conflicts. In this vein, it is recognized that the analysis of ‘spoilers’ and ‘spoiling behaviour<sup>9</sup>’ in Abkhazian and South Ossetian cases remains a significant feature of the study on the CPFs. Additionally, this paper seeks the answer to the question of whether Russia is a ‘peace spoiler’ as acclaimed by Georgians and many other scholars or not.

As acknowledged in this paper both the external and internal forces have contributed to the prolongation of the conflicts. Nevertheless, a distinction might be drawn between these two groups on the basis of their overall impact on the progress of the conflicts. It is claimed here that external actors have been more influential in determining the course of the conflicts,

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Spoiler’ is a term used in the conflict resolution field, which refers to a party or a member of a party who tends to hinder or delay the peace processes, mainly because it has substantial benefits from the continuation of the conflicts. Similarly, a spoiling behavior adds to the entrenchment of a conflict, since it somehow impedes the peaceful resolution of a conflict. A spoiling behaviour, though, might be either intentional or unintentional.

since they have dictated the rules of the peace process as well as the rules of the geopolitical game in the region. Although Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been the directly engaged parties of the conflicts, they have failed to take the lead of the conflict resolution mechanisms. As these domestic players were unable to reach a settlement arrived at *inter se*, they have sought the support of foreign sources with the aim of strengthening their positions. However, due to their structural and diplomatic weakness, they have remained prone to heavy handed manipulation by the external actors. Holding the potential to exploit the differences between the adversary sides, the foreign powers have eventually gained an upper hand in the conflicts. These external players have tried to compel the internal players to abide by their self-perceived interests. Especially, Russia and the United States have aimed to extend their relations with the domestic actors in order to increase their control over the region. The involvement of these powerful actors has subsequently limited the maneuverability of both Georgian leaders and Abkhazian and South Ossetian *de facto* authorities.

Briefly, this paper analyzes the conflict prolonging factors in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by progressively examining the context within which the conflicts have evolved and identifying the causal explanations behind the ensuing stalemate. The bulk of this paper will be concerned with examining the relevant parameters of these conflicts and providing a detailed analysis of its dynamics and the forces behind the volatile contemporary situation. This process will provide a coherent analytical framework within which the motives of the directly or indirectly engaged parties can be evaluated and discussed. It will be under this spectrum that relevant historical, social, political and economic dimensions will be encompassed to provide an enhanced understanding of the impasse behind the conflict resolution in these two specific cases.

#### **1.4 Summarizing the Chapters Involved**

To begin with, Chapter (2) labeled ‘Analytical Framework’ first introduces the concept of *de facto* states so as to provide a platform for the subsequent discussion and analysis of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian questions. Second, it defines the nature of the conflicts as ‘dynamic’, ‘ethnic’ and ‘intractable’ in principle. It is asserted that these protracted conflicts have originally evolved on an ethnic dimension and have become insoluble over the course of time, carrying the features of an ‘intractable conflict’. Third, a variety of studies on conflict resolution are analyzed and a number of relevant theories and their application evaluated, providing an insight on the dimensions of the conflicts, as well as the elements of the peace processes. Lastly, in this chapter the concept of conflict prolonging factors is defined and contextualized in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As fore mentioned, CPF refers to a large array of factors which have accounted for the current impediment, delaying or hindering the conflict resolution processes. The study of the CPFs underlies the basic framework of this paper so as to provide a coherent understanding of the issue at hand.

It is recognized that the conflicts can not be understood independently of their historical contexts. In this vein, chapter (3) labeled ‘Historical Synopsis’ explores the progression of Georgian relations with Abkhazians and South Ossetians and scrutinizes the historic roots of the conflicts to provide an accurate analysis of the causal dynamics for the emergence of the conflicts. Chapter (4) labeled ‘Long-Term Conflict Prolonging Factors’ argues that the long-term CPFs, such as competing ethnic nationalisms, challenging perceptions of the past memories, ‘constructed’ ethnic identities and rival sentiments have emerged as the original sources of the conflicts and have developed throughout the course of the time, adding to the intractability of the conflicts. Chapter (5) labeled ‘Short-Term Conflict Prolonging Factors’ first scrutinizes the roles of the directly engaged parties, namely Georgia,

Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the conflicts and their individual contributions to the ensuing stalemate. Second, it analyzes the involvement of external actors such as Russia, the United States, NATO, UN and OSCE, as well as the role of the ambiguity of the international law. It is claimed that these actors and factors have added to some extent to the 'spoiling' activities and ultimately to the present dead-lock in the conflict resolution process. Chapter (6) labeled 'Evolving Dynamics after 2008 Georgian-Russian War' prescribes the changing dynamics following the August 2008 war, as well as their implications on the conflicts. Finally, the last chapter summarizes and combines the analytical parameters and explanatory evidence addressed throughout the paper, ultimately communicating its concluding remarks.

## 2. Analytical Framework

### 2.1 Abkhazian and Ossetian State Structures: Introducing *De Facto* States

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been *de facto* outside Georgian control; however they have failed to gain international recognition as independent sovereign states. Thus, they have been often referred as ‘*de facto* states’ or as ‘*unrecognized quasi-states*’ in the international relations parlance, sharing many common characteristics with a number of other pronounced separatist regions. These breakaway regions lack ‘external sovereignty’, which is in Kolsto’s words the lack of recognition “*as the sole representative of the nation in international fora.*”<sup>10</sup> On the other side though, they do secure ‘internal sovereignty’ which simply means that they exert control over their territory and people.<sup>11</sup> To be more specific, Scott Pegg defines the ‘*de-facto* state’ as a political entity “*that exists where there is an organized political leadership which has come to power through some degree of indigenous capacity; which receives popular support and which has capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a specific territory maintaining effective control for a specific time period.*” Besides, he adds that a *de-facto* state seeks full constitutional independence and widespread international recognition as a sovereign state.<sup>12</sup> On the other side, Charles King opts to label them as ‘state-like entities’, since they have almost all the features of a state, but no international recognition.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the fact that they have not been accepted as legitimate by the international community, Rywking categorized the ‘common trends’ of these states as following: (i) separation from their parent states due to state disintegration or ethnic or

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<sup>10</sup> Kolsto, P. (2006). “The Sustainability and Future of Unrecognized Quasi-States,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 43:6, pp. 724.

<sup>11</sup> Kolsto (2006), p. 724; King, C. (July 2001). “The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Euroasia’s Unrecognized States,” *World Politics*, 53, pp. 525.

<sup>12</sup> Lynch, D. (Oct. 2002). “Separatist States and Post-Soviet Conflicts,” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944- ), 78: 4, pp. 834, cited from Pegg, Scott (1998). *International Society and the De-facto State*, Aldershot, Brookfield, USA: Ashgate. p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> King (2001), p. 525

religious conflicts; (ii) they have functioned like ‘mini-states’ with their economies, currencies, armed forces, health and education services and administrative units etc; and (iii) there has always been an ‘outside protector’.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Kolsto summarized the reasons behind the survival of these *de facto* states as: (a) the internal support from their local population, (b) militarization of the regions; (c) the support of the powerful ‘protector state’ d) the weakness of the parent state and e) the ineffectiveness of international organizations such as OSCE, UN and NATO.<sup>15</sup> Aside to these, Dov Lynch, further developed this explanation and added that ‘*fear and insecurity*’ and ‘*subsistence syndromes*’, which make these regions’ seek profit through illegal means, have been instrumental to their prolonged existence.<sup>16</sup>

South Ossetia and Abkhazia are two of the four *de facto* states that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union and have remained until today outside the political map.<sup>17</sup> Only very recently, Russia and Nicaragua officially recognized the sovereignty of these two separatist states, whereas for the rest of the world they remain non-existent. Though they failed to gain a membership in the states’ club, they have continued to live stubbornly, exerting control over their territories and constructing necessary state apparatuses. Both South Ossetia and Abkhazia have created their organized political leaderships and have formed their own administrative structures providing governmental services. Since 1990s, they both have acted as ‘mini-states’ with their constitutions, political parties, parliamentary and presidential elections and established ‘nation-state’ formats such as national education systems including instruction of their mother-languages. Furthermore, they have both maintained their survival not only through the means of nationalism, but also through military means allocating

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<sup>14</sup> Rywkin, M. (2006). “The Phenomenon of Quasi-States,” *Diogenes*, 210, pp. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Kolsto (2006), p. 729

<sup>16</sup> Lynch, D. (Nov. 2001). “Managing Separatist States: A Eurasian Case Study,” *Occasional Paper*, Institute for Security Studies of WEU, no: 32. Available at <http://aei.pitt.edu/707/02/occ2e.html>

<sup>17</sup> Lynch (2002)

extensive resources for defense resulting in the high level of ‘militarization’ of the regions.<sup>18</sup> Dealing with ‘state-building’ efforts, they have been heavily reliant on Russia, their ‘protector state’, for economic, diplomatic, moral and military support giving Moscow an opportunity to exploit the separatist conflicts in order to create advantageous conditions in the whole region. Enjoying the backing of Russia, they have further developed their internal forces and consolidated their *de facto* existence. In addition, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been routes for illegal trafficking of drugs, goods and arms due to the power vacuum that emerged in this chaotic environment. As the international community labeled any economic activities in these regions ‘illegitimate’, the majority of the populations began to earn their living from such illegal activities. Their parent state, Georgia, on the other hand failed to attract Abkhazians and South Ossetians due to its fragile and weak status, further contributing to the emerging deep divisions solidified by its uncompromising stance and exclusive rhetoric.

The analysts claim that *de facto* states “*are temporary entities*” and sooner or later their existence will end.<sup>19</sup> Since they do not have the chance of surviving indefinitely, their current status will eventually transform into a different format. According to these analysts, four available possibilities are anticipated for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as for all *de facto* states: (i) gaining international recognition; (ii) uniting with the protector state; (iii) reabsorbing into the parent state or (iv) achieving an autonomous status within the parent state in some kind of a federal arrangement.<sup>20</sup>

To say the least, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in other similar breakaway regions, the existence of the *de facto* structure was a key factor in blocking the peaceful settlement of the conflicts and thus in entrenching the status quo *ante*. On the other hand, as Dov Lynch asserts, the continuation of the status quo *ante* was crucial for the survival of the

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<sup>18</sup> Kolsto (2006), p. 731

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 735 and Rywkin (2006), p. 28

<sup>20</sup> Kolsto (2006), p. 734-738, Rywkin (2006) p. 27 and Lynch (2002

*de facto* states.<sup>21</sup> In other words, in the absence of a political solution that would settle the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the existing conditions would keep stimulating the survival of these ‘state-like entities’ which in return would further obstruct the peace process.

## **2.2 The Nature of the Conflicts**

### **a. ‘Frozen’ or ‘Dynamic’?**

The international community and many of the scholars kept referring to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as ‘frozen conflicts’<sup>22</sup> failing to see their evolving nature and the dynamic factors that shape their background. The fact that almost no progress has been achieved towards the resolution of these conflicts and that no major event to change the status of the breakaway regions has occurred has eventually led to this misinterpretation. Moreover, that there had been relatively peaceful and stable periods in the regions following the wars in 1990s and preceding the ‘five-day’ war in August 2008 has given the wrong impression that they were ‘frozen along ceasefire lines’.<sup>23</sup> As Dov Lynch rightly pointed out that these conflicts have actually remained all, but frozen and thus “*the image of a dynamo is a more fitting way of understanding why there has been no conflict resolution.*”<sup>24</sup> For years now, the driving forces behind the conflicts contributed to sustain the stalemate in the context of the conflicts, blocking the peace settlement whereas shifting the conflicts to different phases over the course of time. In other words, in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia what is frozen has been the conflict resolution process, not the conflict itself. Thus, it would be more correct to

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<sup>21</sup> Lynch, D. (Feb. 2006). “Why Georgia Matters,” *Chaillot Paper*, no: 86 (Institute for Security Studies, Paris), p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Blank, S. (2008). “Russia and the Black Sea’s Frozen Conflicts in Strategic Perspective,” *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 19-3; Khutsishvili, G. (2006). “The Abkhazia and South Ossetia cases: Spoilers in a nearly collapsed peace process,” in E. Newman & O. Richmond (ed.), *Challenges to peacebuilding: Managing spoilers during conflict resolution*, (pp. 282-300). Tokyo: United Nations University Press; Asmus, R. D. & Jackson, B. B. (2004). “The Black Sea and the Frontiers of Freedom,” in R. D. Asmus and B. B. Jackson (ed.), *A New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region*, (pp.17-26). The German Mashall Fund, Washington D.C.; Alieva, L. (2004). “South Caucasus: Going West,” in R. D. Asmus and B. B. Jackson (ed.), *A New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region*, (pp.65-76). The German Mashall Fund, Washington D.C.; Socor, V. (2004). “Frozen Conflicts: A Challenge to Euro-Atlantic Interests”, in R. D. Asmus and B. B. Jackson (ed.), *A New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region*, (pp. 127-137). The German Mashall Fund, Washington D.C.

<sup>23</sup> Cornell, S. E (2000). *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, London & New York: GBR Curzon Press Limited, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Lynch (2006), p. 2 and Lynch (2001)



refer to these two conflicts as ‘dynamic’ given their progressive development and the contemporary forces behind their continuing existence.

### **b. Ethnic Conflicts?**

The Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts have been generally described as ‘ethnic conflicts’ by political scientists, analysts and politicians.<sup>25</sup> However, there have been some critics expressing that the ethnic dimension has not been the basis of the conflicts, but rather only a tool for manipulation handed by external and internal political forces.<sup>26</sup> Another line of criticism has been that they should not be only defined as ‘ethnic’, but ‘ethno-national’, ‘ethno-territorial’ or ‘ethno-political’.<sup>27</sup>

To begin with, this paper recognizes that Abkhazians, South Ossetians and Georgians can be classified as ‘ethnic communities’, since linguistic and cultural differences as well as conscious awareness of distinctive boundaries and a sense of solidarity within each population have been observable and arguably enduring.<sup>28</sup> Besides, in these cases ethnicity has been considerably significant both for group commitment and group entitlement. In other words, the characteristics of ethnicity such as a common name, common sentiment of homeland, shared ancestry myths, histories, traditions and customs have been the determinants in the categorization of these communities.<sup>29</sup> However, considering the conflicting parties as distinct

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<sup>25</sup> For example see Toff, M. D. (Jan. 2001) “Multinationality, Regions and State-Building: The Failed Transition in Georgia,” *Regional and Federal Studies*, 11:3, pp. 123-142; Coppieters, B. (Summer 2001). “Ethno-Federalism and Civic State Building Policies. Perspectives on the Georgian-Akhaz Conflict”, *Regional & Federal Studies*, 11:2, pp. 69-93; Suny, R. G. (1996a). “Nationalism and Social Class in the Russian Revolution: The Cases of Baku and Tbilisi,” in R. G. Suny (ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, (pp. 241-260). The University of Michigan Press.; Zverev, A. (1996). “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-94,” in B. Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Brussels: VUB Press, pg. 46.

<sup>26</sup> Coppieters (2002), p. 73-74.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 73-74. On the other side, S. Cornell calls these conflicts as ‘ethno-political’. See Cornell (2000), p. 247

<sup>28</sup> Ethnicity has been approached and defined by different views such as primordialist, constructivist or moderate constructivists. For a study comparing the theories on ‘ethnicity’, see Fowkes, B. (2002). *Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict in the Post-Communist World*, Gordonsville, VA, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, pg. 1-6..

<sup>29</sup> The understanding of ethnicity here has been derived from A.D Smith’s definition of ‘ethnicity’ in Smith, A. D. (1986). *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford: Blackwell, pg. 32.

‘ethnic communities’, does not necessarily mean that the conflicts should be invariably labeled as ‘ethnic’, since it constitutes a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one.

In the cases of Georgia’s separatist conflicts, animosities between the opposing sides have been deeply rooted along historical cleavage lines, generating hatred and ‘self-other’ distinctions. Besides, proclaiming their ethnic identities and taking action with the aim to maximize the benefits of the members of their ethnic groups, these communities have been determined to fight for their common will, such as ‘secession’. Carrying similar weight, the underlying ‘fear of domination’<sup>30</sup> and insecurity tended to dictate the inter-ethnic communal relations, ultimately breeding ethnic tensions. Considering all these, Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts will be labeled as ‘ethnic conflicts’ throughout this study.<sup>31</sup> On the other side, it will be also acknowledged that national, political and territorial dimensions should not be undermined, bearing in mind the miscellaneous factors that generated the conflicts such as competing nationalist projects, distribution of political rewards, intelligentsias’ attempts to retain power and prestige, allocation of high-rank positions and scarce resources and demands for territorial control and autonomy.<sup>32</sup>

### **c. ‘Intractable’ or ‘Tractable’?**

One way to classify ethnic conflicts (as well as social and inter-communal conflicts) has been according to their persistence, longevity, intensity and severity. In this regard, introducing the ‘intractability’ of conflicts as an analytical concept, Kriesberg aimed to categorize conflicts on an intractable-tractable axis. At the pole of the intractable dimension

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<sup>30</sup> In his theory of ‘ethnic conflict’, Horowitz links the inter-group relations and violence to ‘fear of domination’. Horowitz, D. L. (2000). *Ethnic Groups in Conflicts (with a new preface)*, Berkeley, Calif. ; London : University of California Press.

<sup>31</sup> For an in-depth analysis on ethnic conflicts, see Williams, R. M. (1994). “The Sociology of Ethnic Conflicts: Comparative International Perspectives”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol: 20, pp. 49-79; Horowitz (2000) and Brown, M. E. (1993). “Causes and Implications of Ethnic Conflict” M. E. Brown (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, (pp. 3-26). Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Territorial dimension of an ethnic conflict has been systematically analyzed in Coakley, J. (2003). ‘The Challenge’ in J. Coakley (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), *The Territorial Management of Ethnic Conflict*, (pp.1-22). London; Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass Publishers.

are the conflicts in which participating parties are unwilling to seek a peaceful settlement for the conflict, manifesting the incompatibility of their demands, ultimately resulting in the entrenchment of 'a cycle of violence'. On the other side, tractable conflicts are the ones in which parties acknowledge their mutual interests, recognize the propriety of each other's claims and agree to solve their differences through peaceful means, avoiding violence.<sup>33</sup> Bar-Tal expanded Kriesberg's formulation on intractable conflicts and summarized their characteristics as (1) protracted-persisting for a long time, generally more than a generation; (2) violent- involving human losses, physical damage and refugees; (3) 'zero-sum' in nature- whatever one side gains is perceived at the expense of the other ; (4) significant sectors of the engaged parties have vested economic, military and ideological interests in the conflict's prolongation; (5) perceived 'irreconcilable'- the participating parties consider their goals as extremely opposite and they are reluctant to make concessions; (6) the issues are about values and basic needs which are considered 'essential' for the parties' existence; (7) central- the conflict constantly occupies a salient place on the political agenda.<sup>34</sup> Intractable conflicts might end in two ways; (i) if the antagonists will to use only peaceful means and conduct routine and fruitful negotiations to settle the conflicts, in other words, if the conflicts transform into tractable ones; (ii) if one of the engaged parties is destroyed or collapsed.<sup>35</sup>

The Abkhazian and South Ossetian cases examined in this study have experienced the above features of intractability as the conflicts remained unresolved for almost two decades, resulting in wars in early 1990s followed with heightening of tensions, large-scale skirmishes, relatively low-intensity fighting, military threats and counter-threats, large out-flow of persons and a five-day war in August 2008 with the direct involvement of Russia into the

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<sup>33</sup> Kriesberg, L.(1998). "Intractable Conflicts" in E. Weiner (ed.) *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*, (pp. 332-342). The Continuum Publishing, New York. p. 337 ; Bar-Tal, D. (2003). "Collective Memory of Physical Violence: its Contribution to the Culture of Violence, in E. Cairus (ed.), *Role of Memory in Ethnic Conflict*, (pp. 77-93). Gordonsville, VA, USA: Palgrave Machmillan and Kriesberg, L. (2005). "Nature, Dynamics, and Phases of Intractability" in C. A. Crocker, F. O. Hampson and P. Aall (ed.), *Grasping the Needle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict*, (pp. 65-97), Washinton D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press.

<sup>34</sup> Bar-Tal (2003), p. 77 and Kriesberg (1998), p. 333.

<sup>35</sup> Kriesberg (1998), p. 337.

confrontation. As stated before, the demands of the separatist regions and Georgia have been perceived highly incompatible and no party has been willing either to make compromise to settle the conflicts in a peaceful way or to initiate routine negotiations in a civilized manner. In addition to the irreconcilability of goals, the constructed 'self-other' distinctions and deeply- rooted grievances between the opposing sides have been instrumental for these conflicts to be perceived 'zero-sum' in nature. Furthermore, as will be analyzed in depth throughout the paper, a number of significant members of the parties involved have vested interests in continuing the struggle. In line with the acknowledgement of the conflicts as 'dynamic' rather than 'frozen', it can be suggested that the level of intractability has changed over the course of time, whereas some periods have appeared to be less intractable and some others more.<sup>36</sup>

### **2.3 Analyzing Studies on Conflict Resolution and Their Application**

In the field of conflict studies, the academic interest has predominantly concentrated on disarmament and demobilization;<sup>37</sup> post-conflict peace reconciliation and peace-building;<sup>38</sup> unilateral conflict management and collective security mechanisms.<sup>39</sup> Many of these have been directed around specific cases, such as Northern Ireland, South Africa and Israel/Palestine peace processes.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, most of the intractable ethnic conflicts

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<sup>36</sup> Kriesberg suggests that intractable conflicts can be evaluated on various phases over time as the course of the conflict changes. For the framework of 'phases' he developed see Kriesberg (2005), p. 68-77.

<sup>37</sup> Stedman, S. J. (2003). "Peace Processes and the Challenges of Violence," in J. Darby (ed.), *Contemporary Peace Making: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, (pp. 103-113). Gordonsville, VA. USA: Palgrave Macmillan; Gamba, V. (2003). "Managing Violence: Disarmament and Demobilization," in J. Darby (ed.), *Contemporary Peace Making: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, (pp. 125-136). Gordonsville, VA. USA: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>38</sup> Hamber, B. (2003). "Transformation and Reconciliation," in J. Darby (ed.), *Contemporary Peace Making: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, (pp. 224-234). Gordonsville, VA. USA: Palgrave Macmillan; Lederach, J. P. (1998), "Beyond Violence: Building Sustainable Peace," in E. Weiner (ed.), *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*. (pp. 236-246). New York: Continuum Publishing.

<sup>39</sup> Leggold, J. & Weiss, T. G. (ed.) (1998). *Collective Conflict Management and Changing World Politics*, New York: Suny Press.

<sup>40</sup> For examples see Gidron B., Katz, S. N. & Hasenfeld, Y. ed., (2002). *Mobilizing for Peace: Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and South Africa*, Oxford University Press and Chabal, P. ed. (2006). *Is Violence Inevitable in Africa?: Theories of Conflicts and Approaches to Conflict Prevention*, Leiden, NLD: Brill, N. H. E. J. , N. V. Koninklijke, Boekhandel en Drukkerij.

have not only remained within the context of the region that the conflict resides, but have also been externalized. With this regard, the academics of conflict studies have begun to construct theories on internationalization of the conflicts, more specifically their diffusion and escalation building up a link between protracted ethnic conflicts and international security, and on third-party interventionism.<sup>41</sup> The general outlook is notably supporting the fact that international involvement, as well third party interventionism has been instrumental in spoiling or delaying peace settlement in many of such conflicts.<sup>42</sup>

Recent trends illustrate that although the major practices in international conflict management and conflict resolution have been based on the state system dominant in world politics, the traditional understanding has been challenged with the increased emphasis on sub-state and non-state actors, as well as multilateral actions outreaching national interests and state boundaries.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, external powers including outside actors as well as international organizations have not only been interested in interfering in ethnic conflicts, but also in mediating them. Thus a wide range of literature on conflict or conflict resolution has drawn attention to the role of international mediation, most remarkably the role of 'UN' as an

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<sup>41</sup> Review of literature on the 'internationalization' of ethnic conflicts and third party interventionism, see Lobell, S. E. & Mauceri, P. (2004). "Diffusion and Escalation of Ethnic Conflict", in S. E. Lobell (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics: Explaining Diffusion and Escalation*, Gordonsville, (pp. 1-10). VA. USA: Palgrave Machmillan; Horowitz, S. (2004). "Identities Unbound: Escalating Ethnic Conflict in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Tajikistan," in S. E. Lobell (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics: Explaining Diffusion and Escalation*, Gordonsville, (pp. 51-74). VA. USA: Palgrave Machmillan and Lake, D. A & Rothchild, D. (1998). "Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict", in D. A. Lake and D. Rothchild (ed.), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, (pp. 1-10). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. For detailed studies on third party interventionims see Berdal, M & Cooper R. (1993). "Outside Intervention in Ethnic Conflicts," in M. E. Brown (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, (pp. 181-205). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press and Toscano, R. (1998). "An answer to War: Conflicts in Intervention in Contemporary International Relations," in E. Weiner (ed.), *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*. (pp. 263-279). New York: Continuum Publishing.

<sup>42</sup> Lobell & Mauceri (2004); Gurr, T. R. (1992). "The Internationalization of Protracted Communal Conflicts Since 1945: Which Groups, Where and How." in M. I. Midlarsky (ed.), *The Internationalization of Communal Strife*, London: Routledge; Carment D. (1993). "The International Dimension of Ethnic Conflict: Concepts, Indicators, and Theory", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol: 30, issue: 2, pp. 137-150 and Brown, M. E. (1996). "International Conflict and International Action." in M. E. Brown (ed.) *The International Dimension of Internal Conflict*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

<sup>43</sup> (Art. G-5)

arbiter.<sup>44</sup> Although in principle the UN propagates the abstraction from involvement in the domestic affairs of other states, this has not obstructed individual states and the UN itself to meddle in conflicts with the aim of contributing to the settlement of the differences through peaceful means. Ironically, the fact that the mediators of such conflicts have often taken sides has tended to impede their resolution. Besides, the problematic structure of the UN in coming to consensus and implementing action has limited its ability to provide 'collective security'.<sup>45</sup>

These peace processes are predominantly dictated by the motivation of the international community which often neglects the demands of the local parties failing to address the underlying causes of the conflicts as well as the internal dynamics behind the ongoing confrontation.<sup>46</sup> Darby and Ginty defined peace processes as the certain combinations of a set of peace initiatives with systematic and vigorous qualities that enable it to resist some of the arising pressures. In a peace process, a peace initiative might be at any time and it might be formal or informal, private or public, directed by popular support or confined to elite-level concurrence.<sup>47</sup> A peace process can not be completed unless a final political decision is agreed upon. In this regard, achieving a successful outcome in a peace process depends on the inclusion of all key actors in the process, the willingness of the parties to compromise, as well as the avoiding the use of military force as an available option.<sup>48</sup>

Whereas some academic work has focused on the content of the peace initiatives, which outlines an outcome meeting the aspirations of all engaged parties within a conflict;<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Walker, J. (1993). "International Mediation of Ethnic Conflicts," in M. E. Brown (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, (pp. 165-179). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press and Roberts, A. (1993). "The United Nations and International Security," in M. E. Brown (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, (pp. 207-235). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

<sup>45</sup> Walker (1993) and Roberts (1993)

<sup>46</sup> Darby, J. & Ginty, R. M. (2003). "Introduction: What Peace? What Process," in J. Darby (ed.), *Contemporary Peace Making: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, (pp. 1-6). Gordonsville, VA. USA: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 2

<sup>48</sup> Darby, J. & Ginty, R. M. (2000). *The Management of Peace Processes*, London: Macmillan, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> de Varennes, F. (2003). "Peace Accords and Ethnic Conflicts: A Comparative Analysis of Content and Approaches," in J. Darby (ed.), *Contemporary Peace Making: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, (pp. 151-160). Gordonsville, VA. USA: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zartnam's ripeness theory has drawn attention on the timing rather than the substance of the proposals for conflict resolution. Particularly, Zartnam's work has suggested that conflicts are open to reconciliation when the engaged parties arrive at a moment of 'mutually hurting stalemate' (MHS), where victory seems impossible on either side as well as any continuation of the conflict would be dramatically costly to the parties involved.<sup>50</sup> When the moment is perceived to be 'ripe', the parties involved are ready to put an end to the stalemate with the aim of finding a mutually acceptable solution. If the parties observe the possibility of a negotiated solution, in other words if they "*sense a way out*", they will commit themselves to initiate fruitful negotiations.

Negotiations in that sense are a crucial element of a peace process, since the willingness of the engaged parties to initiate negotiations is vital to sustain progress towards conflict resolution. Guelke adds that for negotiation to be successful flexible leadership is adamant and grasping Zartnam's 'ripeness theory' also posits the significance of the right timing.<sup>51</sup> It follows that although "*more or less a symbiotic relationship*" seems to reside between negotiations and peace processes, it holds true that the negotiations are not merely challenged by violence.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, the failure of achieving a negotiated political solution may not result in the eruption of a violent conflict, "*as the case of Cyprus's long, largely bloodless conflict since partition in 1974 underlines.*"<sup>53</sup>

It should be acknowledged that a peace process might entail at some point or other a possibly extensive period of impasse<sup>54</sup> in which the negotiations are dead-locked and

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<sup>50</sup> See Zartnam, I. W. (1985). *Ripe for Resolution*, New York: Oxford University Press. For Zartnam's comments on the critics of his ripeness theory and his suggestions for the development of the concept see Zartnam, I. W. (2000). "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," in P. C. Stern (ed.), *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, (pp. 225-250). Washington DC, USA: National Academies Press and Zartnam I. W. (2003). "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments, in Darby, J. (ed.) *Contemporary Peace Making: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, (pp. 19-29). Gordonsville, VA, USA: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>51</sup> Guelke, A. (2003). "Negotiations and Peace Processes," in J. Darby (ed.), *Contemporary Peace Making: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, (pp. 53-64). Gordonsville, VA, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 53.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>54</sup> Darby & Ginty, p. 8.

ultimately the peace process is amenable to prolongation. This is mainly because it creates groups or individuals who have a vested interest and clear incentives in the continuation of the conflict. Recently, numerous studies have begun to focus on the factors that disrupt a peace process and explore the phenomena of ‘spoilers’ and ‘spoiling’, generally defined as “*groups and tactics that actively seek to hinder, delay or undermine conflict settlement through a variety of means and a variety of motives.*”<sup>55</sup> It is recognized by a number of scholars that ‘spoiling’ is a natural part of a conflict resolution procedure, since every peace process creates ‘spoilers’ with different intentions, goals, motivations, attitudes and commitment.<sup>56</sup> Spoilers, who believe that the materialization of a peace accord would threaten their power and interests, might be both from inside or outside the peace process.<sup>57</sup>

Additionally significant, most of the actors in a peace process are more interested in prolonging the peace process, rather than totally dismissing it or reaching a sustainable peace settlement. They benefit from manipulating the whole process in order to access the potential financial and political resources provided, to achieve recognition and legitimacy, to gather material gains as well as support from allies.<sup>58</sup> As Newmann and Richmond asserts, “*spoiling behaviour, at its most successful, seems to lead not to the end of a peace process, but to the inclusion of new sets of interests, the recognition of proto-political actors, and sometimes further concessions and the commitment of more international resources.*”<sup>59</sup> In short, with the desire to retain the assets of a peace process, the so-called ‘devious objectives’, they accept to be a part of the negotiations, even if they constantly reject any peace proposal. That

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<sup>55</sup> Newman, E. & Richmond, O. (2006), “Obstacles to peace processes: Understanding spoiling,” in E. Newman & O. Richmond (ed.), *Challenges to peacebuilding: Managing spoilers during conflict resolution*, (pp. 1-19). Tokyo: United Nations University Press, pg. 1. Also see Stedman, S. J. (1997). “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” *International Security*, vol: 22, no: 2, pp. 5-53 and Stedman, S. J. (2000). “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” in P. C. Stern (ed.), *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, (pp. 178-224). Washington DC, USA: National Academies Press.

<sup>56</sup> Newman & Richmond (2006), Stedman (1997) and Stedman (2000)

<sup>57</sup> Newman & Richmond (2006), p. 18 and Stedman (2000), p: 178

<sup>58</sup> Newman & Richmond (2006) and Aggestam, K. (2006). “Internal and external dynamics of spoiling: A negotiation approach,” in E. Newman & O. Richmond (ed.), *Challenges to peacebuilding: Managing spoilers during conflict resolution*, (pp. 23-39). Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

<sup>59</sup> Newman & Richmond (2006), p. 18



is to say, “*by not ending the process, everything remains on the table*” and they can continue to reap the benefits of the stalemate.<sup>60</sup> Thus, insider spoiling especially becomes very likely when one or more of the adversaries revert from conceding the benefits of an on-going peace process where these benefits exceed the gains of a peace agreement.<sup>61</sup>

It is also significant to note that intractable conflicts by nature are vulnerable to spoiling activities, since its aforementioned inherent features predicate the difficulty of negotiation and compromise. Besides, as Karin Aggestam stresses out, such conflicts are subject to ‘*asymmetrical relations*’ in which the stronger parties dominate the rules of the peace process and try to impose their self-perceived interests, whereas the weaker ones attempt to undermine the conflict settlement assuming that the process “*denies them justice*”.<sup>62</sup> In this kind of situations, the biggest responsibility falls upon the international community which has the ability to stipulate necessary conditions for the resolution of conflicts. However, the simultaneous involvement of many external actors can complicate the process and unintentionally generate opportunities for spoiling activities.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, in intractable conflicts, the negotiation strategies are directed by competitive motives, which inevitably acquire certain spoiling qualities. In this vein, Karin Aggestam draws attention to Morgenthau’s realist paradigm where peace processes are subject to a struggle of power between rival forces which employ a combination of persuasion, compromise and coercive threat to manipulate negotiations and maximize potential benefits.<sup>64</sup> As such, the peace process reflects the ultimate pursuance of self-interests which inescapably conflict, resulting in inflexible preferences and incompatible

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<sup>60</sup> Newman & Richmond (2006) and Richmond, O. (2006). “The linkage between devious objectives and spoiling behaviour in peace processes,” in E. Newman & O. Richmond (ed.), *Challenges to peacebuilding: Managing spoilers during conflict resolution*, (pp. 59-77). Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

<sup>61</sup> Zahar, M. J. (2006). “Understanding the violence of insiders: Loyalty, custodians of peace, and the sustainability of conflict settlement,” in E. Newman & O. Richmond (ed.), *Challenges to peacebuilding: Managing spoilers during conflict resolution*, (pp. 40-58). Tokyo: United Nations University Press, p. 45.

<sup>62</sup> Aggestam (2006), p. 26-27

<sup>63</sup> Newman & Richmond (2006), p. 16

<sup>64</sup> Aggestam (2006), p. 36.

demands. As it can be seen, competitive negotiation strategies and spoiling behavior are largely interchangeable concepts which in turn blur the intentional-unintentional trajectory. Thus, in practice, the diagnosis of spoilers, as well as the categorization of spoiling behavior is highly problematic and subject to contestation. What is more, the predictability of the ‘spoiling’ theory is further limited since “*the notion of spoiling tends to be viewed as a rather static phenomenon, whereas in practice it is highly dynamic, as the actors’ goals may alter during a peace process.*”<sup>65</sup>

Conflict resolution theorists, consistent with the notion of the rationality theory, focus on the realist conception that underpins the maximization of self-perceived interests as the ultimate goal of actors involved. However, diverging from international relations theorists; they recognize that self interests may override the national interests.<sup>66</sup> Hence, they assume that the engaged parties of a conflict, whether people or institutions, compete to gain wealth, power, territory or any other scarce resources of particular value.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, sometimes people may act in a fashion that contradicts their interests, since they might be driven by passion that stifles any rational behaviour. Morton Deutsch explains that attempts to increase one’s gains in the expense of other’s might be in reality ‘self-defeating’, since the perceived ‘zero-sum’ understanding might yield in return a ‘lose-lose’ outcome.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the conflict resolution theories should take into account the irrational and unpredictable behaviour of human beings who often succumb to psychological adversities.

In this light, one can claim that what has been generally neglected in scholarly works on conflict, conflict management and resolution has been the need for comprehending the peace processes beyond the reach of the negotiations between the political leaders of the

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<sup>65</sup> Aggestam (2006), p. 36.

<sup>66</sup> Hauss, C. (2001). *International Conflict Resolution*, New York: Continuum Publishing, p. 39.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39

<sup>68</sup> Morton Deutch introduces the concept of the ‘anarchic social situation’ where “*there is a kind of situation that does not allow the possibility of ‘rational’ behavior so long as the conditions for social order or mutual trust do not exist.*” See Deutsch, M. (1998). “Constructive Conflict Resolution: Principles, Training, and Research,” in E. Weiner (ed.), *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*. (pp. 199-216). New York: Continuum Publishing, p. 208.

engaged parties. It was only after Roger Fisher developed the concept of ‘interactive conflict resolution’ that attention was redirected away from inter-governmental dialogue to a broader understanding of peace settlements achieved at lower levels of interaction.<sup>69</sup> Saunders emphasizes that, “*policy for ending deep-rooted human conflict will not be realistic unless policy makers think in terms of a multilevel peace process that embraces both official and public peace-making efforts.*”<sup>70</sup> This sheds light to the psychological dimension of conflicts that draws from group-based emotions constituting an integral part of conflict resolution by building on the inter-communal trust between negotiating parties necessary for the achievement of peace reconciliation by means of ‘positive-sum’ solutions.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, the emotional dimension of the conflicts is often crucial to the cultivation of enmity between conflicting populations driven by exclusive identity politics.<sup>72</sup> The problematic aspect of ethnic-driven conflicts resides on the fundamental human need of identity formation against a constructed constitutive ‘other’, generating a breeding ground for the manipulation of masses along ethnically divisive lines. As such identity-related and emotionally-charged conflicts are far more complex and enduring and consequently are often “*not amenable to split-the-difference, cake-cutting solutions based on compromise.*”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Deutsch (1998); Saunders, H. H. (2000). “Interactive Conflict Resolution: A View for Policy Makers on Making and Building Peace,” in P. C. Stern (ed.), *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, (pp. 251-293). Washington DC, USA: National Academies Press and “Interactive Conflict Resolution: Issues in Theory, Methodology and Evaluation,” in P. C. Stern (ed.), *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, (pp. 294-337). Washington DC, USA: National Academies Press.

<sup>70</sup> Saunders (2000), p. 252.

<sup>71</sup> Mitchell, C. (2003). “Mediation and the Ending of Conflicts”, in J. Darby (ed.), *Contemporary Peace Making: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, (pp. 77-100). Gordonsville, VA. USA: Palgrave Macmillan. Also see Halperin, E. (2008). “Group-based Hatred in Intractable Conflict in Israel,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol: 52, issue: 2, p. 713-736.

<sup>72</sup> Bloomfield D. & Reilly, B. (1998b). “The Changing Nature of Conflict and Conflict Management” in P. Harris and B. Reilly (ed.), *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators*, (pp. 9-28) Stockholm: IDEA Handbook Series, p. 9-11.

<sup>73</sup> Bloomfield, D. Ghai Y. & Reilly, B. (1998a). “Analyzing Deep-Rooted Conflict” in P. Harris and B. Reilly (ed.) *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators*, (pp. 31- 40) Stockholm: IDEA Handbook Series, p. 37.

## **2.4 The Conflict-Prolonging Factors Contextualized**

Although there has been growing academic interest in constructing conflict management and conflict resolution techniques which contribute in developing better frameworks for resolving the conflicts in specific regions. Most of the conflicts are too complicated to be understood by general attachments. Particularly, the protracted conflicts can be better understood if analyzed within their specific geopolitical and regional context. Furthermore, the traditional conceptualization of conflict resolution, conflict management or peace-building might be limited to comprehend the causes behind the persistence of these intractable conflicts. Thus, in order to bring the prospect for a future peace settlement closer to realization, they should be analyzed idiosyncratically with specific conflict resolution structures that are designed according to the dynamics that determine the course and development of each conflict.

Keeping in line with this understanding, this paper will concentrate on two particular ethnic and intractable conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are two *de facto* state-like entities within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia. To remind, the conflicts in these regions have been designed as ‘zero-sum’ conflicts in which the adversaries over years have accumulated hatred, hostility and prejudiced perceptions towards each other feeding mistrust and existential fears within their societies. Besides, in these two cases of ethnic conflicts the constructed ‘identities’, as well as ‘nationalist ideologies’ have served as the basis for distinction from the opposing side generating legitimacy for the local political leaderships. The conflicts have become intractable as in such an insecure environment parties have tended to resist any concession considered disadvantageous for their perceived interests. Eventually, the parties have sought to undermine the conflict resolution mechanisms, freezing the peace process and supporting the prolongation of the conflicts.

Until recently, the studies on Abkhazia and South Ossetia have either explored the root causes of the conflicts, most notably within the historical and socio-cultural context or have discussed state-building forms in Georgia and possible federative arrangements for the future, generally neglecting the current dynamics that shape these separatist conflicts. What is more, there has not yet been a systematic and in-depth analysis of the major circumstances, players and factors that have hindered the conflict resolution process in these particular cases. On the other hand, there were several recent studies on *de facto* states, particularly on the ones in former-Soviet territories which have attempted to analyze the sustainability of their existence.<sup>74</sup> The overall insight was that in these conflicts there emerged a prevalent structure which benefited a number of engaged actors in such a way that suppressed any incentive to alter the status quo. In particular, Dov Lynch in his work '*Managing Separatist States: A Eurasian Case Study*'<sup>75</sup> highlighted that the dynamic forces driving these separatist states and the existing conflicts entrenched the pervasive logic that sustained the status quo. These nomothetic explanations were useful for providing a set of concepts as well as constructing frameworks that explained the insolvability of the conflicts in Eurasian *de facto* states, yet acquired a general outlook that failed to grasp the particularities of specific cases, such as the Abkhazian and South Ossetian contextual paradigms. Only by employing a more systematic and qualitative analysis can one provide a complete interface on the cases that ultimately transgresses over-simplistic understandings on the nature of the conflicts and the dynamics that drive their evolution.

The concepts like 'conflict-resolution', 'conflict-management' and 'conflict prevention' have been frequently used in international diplomacy or in conflict studies, but mostly with 'vague' meanings. In this case, it will be useful to conceptualize 'conflict resolution' and 'conflict resolution/peace process' to show what kind of a meaning they will

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<sup>74</sup> King (2001), Kolsto (2006), Rywkin (2006), Lynch (2002) and Lynch (2001).

<sup>75</sup> Lynch (2001)

bear throughout this paper, as well as to draw their distinction from the other commonly used concepts. Conflict resolution is a set of approaches which seeks to remove the sources of a conflict and achieve an 'outcome' by peaceful means. Its distinction from conflict management is that conflict management deals with the on-going conflict, rather than the outcome of a peace process. Conflict resolution/peace process on the other hand is the whole process from the beginning of a conflict until the 'end' of it, which 'end' here does imply the termination of the ultimate peace accord or the final political solution to an existing question. Although the term 'peace process' might be sometimes interchangeably used with the term 'negotiation process', in this paper the peace process with reference to Guelke will imply a distinctive concept. Hence the termination of the negotiation talks will not insinuate the end to the conflict resolution process. Besides, the emotional and psychological aspects of non-official communal relations will be also taken into account.

In conventional wisdom, conflict resolution methods generally rely upon the concepts of concession, compromise and conciliation. Thus, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the willingness of the parties, a mutually accepted peace proposal as well as the 'right timing' or in Zartnam's conceptualization a 'ripe moment' are needed to achieve progress in a peace process. Yet, what is neglected are the forces working behind the conflicts that thwart the emergence of these necessary conditions. Hence, before conflict resolution strategies are considered, one should initially develop a clear view of the conflict itself, predominantly its causes and effects. To be more concrete, an insight into the nature and dynamics of the on-going conflicts is crucial to produce a well-developed conflict resolution framework and peace proposal. In this light, this paper does not aim to advocate methods for eradicating the conflicts or examining the criteria required for an ultimate peace accord in the Abkhazian and South Ossetian cases. Rather, it aims to study the relation between the peace process and a wide range of historical, economic and political factors that yield a substantial effect on it.

This paper acknowledges the fact that the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia also involve a large array of actors and motives. Consistent with the current approach in the international relations field, it is recognized that not only states, but also sub-state and non-state actors have been involved in one way or the other in the conflict resolution process. Moreover, taking the rationality theory as its basis, this paper assumes that all groups and individuals in a conflict tend to act on their self-perceived interests, pursuing gain maximization on the ground of cost-benefit analysis. Nevertheless, it allows for the possibility of 'irrational behaviours', as well as the unpredictability of actions due to existential free will and the changing context.

As fore mentioned, peace processes in intractable conflicts have played host to a wide range of players, the so-called 'spoilers' who have been involved directly or indirectly by attempting to keep the conflict unresolved and the process in dead-lock. The cases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia both confirm and challenge this approach. The fact that the conflict resolution processes have remained standstill for almost two decades and that a variety of actors, not necessarily only the immediate participants, have benefited from this impasse validates the existence of 'spoilers' and 'spoiling behaviour'. However, the complexity of these players' motives and the multitude of the factors that determine their attitudes, as well as the competitive zero-sum nature of the conflicts have clouded the identification of 'spoilers', as well as the diagnosis of the intentional/unintentional dichotomy.

Still, whether deliberate or not, the impact of spoilers remains detrimental for the insoluble characteristic of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Spoiling behaviour, however, remains only one feature of a vast range of conflict prolonging factors that combine to impede the conflict resolution process. Conflict prolonging factors (CPF) in this study refer to aspects and circumstances which contribute to the sustaining of the logic driving the endurance of a conflict within its multifaceted and changing nature. As such, the diverse

dynamics that prescribe the course of the conflict will be subjugated under the umbrella of conflict prolonging factors. That is, a collection of complex interactions of different external and internal forces, which reciprocally influence and determine the context of the conflict.

Although highly intertwined, the dynamics of the conflict need to be categorized in order to simplify and clarify the composite dimensions of the ensuing conflicts. To put it very simply, it is not possible to address the causes behind the persistence of the confrontation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia without distinctively determining the most notable conflict-prolonging factors. In line with this, it will be acknowledged that these factors might emerge in both short and long term trajectories. Long-term conflict prolonging factors will cover the dynamics that have been shaped by the historical and socio-cultural context in the regions which in turn determine the very structure of the conflicts. It is contended here that although the elements within the long-term CPF have originally implied the roots of the conflict, they have transcended in the current situation resulting in disrupted inter-communal relations and polarized attitudes, which eventually have added to the vicious circle that has characterized the conflicts. On the other side, the short-term CPF will mainly focus on the political, economic and geopolitical dynamics both within regional and international context that have been developed concomitant to the progress of the conflict. Lastly, although a variety of factors will be analyzed in isolation, the overall judgment will remain that only when these assorted dynamics are considered together can they provide a meaningful and substantial framework for understanding the lack of progress towards the resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.



### **3. Historical Background**

#### **3.1 Pre-Soviet Union Period**

##### **3.1.1 Georgia under Tsarist Russia**

The roots of the current conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians and Ossetians do not stretch back to centuries preceding the Tsarist Russian rule, mainly because in the medieval times the peoples of the region were not consciously mobilized nationalities, lacking a “*territorial or ethno-cultural sense of homeland or nation.*”<sup>76</sup> The underlying reason was that until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the lands of present-day Georgia had been largely fragmented with the exception of a brief period of the united Georgian kingdom of Abkhazeti-Kartli including present-day Abkhazia and eastern Georgia, during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Paradoxically, it was the Tsarist Russia which ended the fragmentation within Georgia by bringing its lands under a single political authority in the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though resisted hard, Abkhazia was also incorporated into the Tsarist Empire in 1810 with the assistance of Mingrelian troops and the puppet prince, Seferbey, installed by Russians.<sup>77</sup> Not surprisingly, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Abkhazian communities led constant popular uprisings against the oppressive Tsarist regime. Following the biggest revolt in 1866, Russians began to force a large number of Abkhazians, mainly Muslim ones to migrate to various parts of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>78</sup>

##### **3.1.2 Brief Period of Independent Menshevik Georgian Republic**

On the other hand, Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian rivalry articulated itself as the communities chose different wings of the Socialist Party in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>76</sup> Suny, R. G. (1998). *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR and the Successor States*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 98.

<sup>77</sup> Shenfield, S. (May 2004). “How Far Back Does the Conflict Go?” Research and Analytical Supplement (Johnson’s Russia List), special issue no: 24. Available at [www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/8226.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/8226.cfm). Also see Hewitt, B. G. (1995). “Demographic Manipulation in the Caucasus (with special reference to Georgia)”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 8:1, p. 56.

<sup>78</sup> Hunter, (2006), p. 117. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, large numbers of Abkhazians had converted their religion to Islam, being influenced from their Ottoman rulers. Mainly they were these Muslim Abkhazians who were forced to migrate by the Tsarist regime.

Whereas Abkhazian and Ossetian socialists preferred Bolsheviks linking themselves with Lenin's Russia, Georgian socialists preferred to follow the more liberal Mensheviks.<sup>79</sup> Following the October Revolution that put the Tsarist rule to an end, the Georgian socialists achieved to found a Menshevik Republic in 1918,<sup>80</sup> merging socialism with nationalism and grasping the support from most layers of the Georgian society. Slightly later, a group of Ossetians, who had arrived to the southern side of the Caucasus Mountains escaping from the Mongol invasion in 13<sup>th</sup> century and settling in the present-day South Ossetia, came under the rule of this new Republic, together with the Bolshevik Abkhazians. On the other side, South Ossetian's ethnic counterparts, North Ossetians, became attached to the Terek Soviet Republic.<sup>81</sup> Although the most stable republic in Transcaucasia of the time was Georgia, the Red Army's invasion in February 1921 brought the end of its brief independence<sup>82</sup> leaving the process of the Georgian national movement incomplete. Articulating the first attempts of 'Georgianization', the period of the first independent Georgian Republic had led to mounting tensions and conflict with Abkhazians and Ossetians.<sup>83</sup> Hence, not surprisingly, the tyranny of the Red Army was welcomed with enthusiasm in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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<sup>79</sup> To see more information on the consolidation of Menshevik power in Georgia between 1905-1918, Suny (1998), p. 100 and Hunter S. T. (1994). *The Transcaucasus in Transition: Nation Building and Conflict*, Washington D. C.: The Center for Strategic & International Studies, p. 110-141.

<sup>80</sup> For more information on the period of short-lived Georgian statehood between 1918-1921, see Jones, S & Parsons, R. (1996). "Georgia and the Georgians", in G. Smith (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), *The Nationalities Question in the Post-Soviet States*, (pp. 291-313). NY: Longman., p. 292-293.

<sup>81</sup> In the following years, North Ossetia would be first incorporated as an *okrug* in Mountain ASSR, then on July 1924 would be recognized as an autonomous oblast and on December 1936 its status would be upgraded as 'North Ossetian ASSR'. This information is received from the article "South Ossetia" in the website of Caucasian Foundation [http://www.kafkas.org/tr/english/bgkafkas/bukaf\\_gosetya.html](http://www.kafkas.org/tr/english/bgkafkas/bukaf_gosetya.html).

<sup>82</sup> For further information on the invasion of Georgia by the Red Army see Pipes, R. (1964). *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism 1917-1923*, (rev. ed.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 234-241.

<sup>83</sup> Cornell, (2000), p. 135 and (Art. 33, pg. 135; Jones, S. F, (1994) . "Georgia: a failed democratic transition," in I. Bremmer & R. Taras (ed.), *Nation and politics in the Soviet successor states*, (pp.288-310), New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 290 and Pipes (1964), p. 213.

## 3.2 The Soviet Union Period

### 3.2.1 Foundation of the USSR and Integration of New Nationalities System

After Lenin's Bolsheviks regained control in the former Russian Empire lands, they officially established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), as a federal multinational state, by signing the Union Treaty in December 1922 in which some non-Russian nationalities were given the status of a Union Republic within the federation offering them considerable political autonomy in exchange of their full sovereignties.<sup>84</sup> Though given the status of a Union Republic, Georgia would be tied up to the USSR not as a separate entity, but rather as a part of the Transcaucasian Federation (TSFSR) until its dissolution in 1936.<sup>85</sup>

On the other hand, whereas Ossetians in South Ossetia were only given partial autonomy as an 'autonomous oblast' within Georgian Republic, Abkhazia had become an independent Soviet Republic in March 1921 and by the end of the same year had joined with Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) under a treaty relationship. Sharing the same status with Georgian SSR, Abkhazia became one of the signatories to the formation of TSFSR. However, in 1931 the Union Republic status of Abkhazia was downgraded to an Autonomous Republic (ASSR) within Georgia, generating discontent among the Abkhazians.

Georgians began to involve heavily in the Soviet system, mainly by the help of the nativization (*korenizatsiyaa*) policies of the early Soviet period which gave enormous privileges to the titular nationalities of each union republics and autonomous territories, such as leading positions in the state apparatus and large subsidies for cultural and linguistic development. These policies were intended "*to woo non-Russians into the Soviet camp*".<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Smith, G. (1996). "The Soviet State and Nationalities Policy", in G. Smith (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), *The Nationalities Question in the Post-Soviet States*, (pp. 2-22). NY: Longman, p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> In the meantime, TSFSR was one of the six republics of the Union. The Georgian political leadership in the early 1920s showed resistance not to be a part of TSFSR fearing that it would limit its autonomy. For further information see Jones & Parsons (1996). It is also remarkable to note that with the formation of TSFSR, Tbilisi became both its capital and cultural center and Georgians "*held a disproportionately large number of positions in the administration of a federative republic.*" See Cornell (2000), p. 136.

<sup>86</sup> Tuminez, A. S. (Fall 2003). "Nationalism, Ethnic Pressures, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5:4, p. 89.

Due to *korenizatsiyaa* policies, by the mid-1920s, almost all significant posts of the union republic were allocated to Georgians, whereas Abkhazians and Ossetians were over-represented in their local administrative and political structures. Additionally significant, *korenizatsiyaa* introduced instruction in the languages of the titular nationalities, notably Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian in schools, contributing to the cultural development of all titular nationalities in Georgia.<sup>87</sup>

### **3.2.2 Stalin and Beria: An Iron Fist over Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

During the period of Stalin, the undisputed and authoritarian leader of the Kremlin, and his loyal client Lavrenti Beria<sup>88</sup> an ethnic Mingrelian born in Abkhazia, an iron fist clamped down not only on Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but on every part of the Union. The collectivization and industrialization policies of the late 1920s were followed by Stalin's Great Purges that devastated the political opposition and wiped out a great majority of the cultural intelligentsia and party leadership.<sup>89</sup> Aside to this, Abkhazians and Ossetians had become subject to assimilationist policies pursued by Georgian officials, particularly by Beria. This period witnessed a campaign of Georgification that distributed key official positions to Georgians, changed non-Georgian place names to Georgian, closed all Abkhaz and Ossetian language schools, ceased publishing in other languages than Russian and Georgian, and altered the Abkhaz and Ossetian scripts to the Georgian based alphabet.<sup>90</sup>

Particularly significant, Abkhazians further suffered from the new 'resettlement policy' orchestrated by Beria as an aspect of the 'forced collectivization' policies of Stalin, by which a large number of non-Abkhazian populations, mainly Mingrelians from Western

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<sup>87</sup> Suny, R. G. (1989). *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, London: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd Publishers, p. 233.

<sup>88</sup> Lavrenti Beria was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Georgia from 1931-1938 and Commissariat for Internal Affairs from 1938 to 1953.

<sup>89</sup> Jones & Parsons (1996), p. 295-296. For information on Great Purges, see Suny (1998), p. 261-268. See also the devastation of intelligentsia in Georgian republic throughout Great Purges and its consequences, Colarusso, J. "Abkhazia", *Central Asian Survey*, vol: 14, no.1, 1995, pp. 78.

<sup>90</sup> Hewitt (1995), p. 57-58. Before the amendment, Abkhaz as a literary language had begun to be written in Latin-based script by 1928. Hewitt also highlights that in 1936-1937, all similar so called *Young Written Languages* of the SU had shifted their scripts to a form of Cyrillic including the Ossetians of South Ossetia.

Georgia, were brought into Abkhazia throughout 1940s and 50s. Further altering the demographics of the region, Abkhazians perceived these policies as a strategy to turn Abkhazians into a minority within their own homeland and to suppress their political and economic development.<sup>91</sup> Abkhazians not only lost demographic power in their region, but also political power in their local administrative structure since a large number of ethnic Abkhazian officials and party members were removed and the percentage of Georgian party cadres began to increase at the expense of their ethnic Abkhaz and Russian counterparts.<sup>92</sup>

### **3.2.3 After Stalin, Before Gorbachev: Signals for the Future's Ethnic Conflicts**

After Stalin's death in 1953, with the de-Stalinization efforts of Khrushchev, central control loosened and limitations on ethnic expression were to some extent reduced.<sup>93</sup> In line with this, as compensation to the policies of the previous two decades, publishing and broadcasting in Abkhaz and Ossetian was allowed, new Abkhaz newspapers were issued, Abkhazian and Ossetian schools were re-opened and a sector of Abkhaz language and literature was established in Sukhum(i)<sup>94</sup> Pedagogical Institute.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, over the course of the following years, Moscow increased the number of leading positions held by Abkhazians in local structures and granted Abkhazia greater administrative autonomy in

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<sup>91</sup> Blauvelt, T. (May 2007). "Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era," *Nationalities Papers*, 35:2, pp. 218-219.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210, 217-218. Membership of Abkhaz in the Abkhazian Party organization fell from 28.3% in 1929 to 14.9% in 1939 whereas the membership of Georgian increased from 48.2% to 40.3%. (in the article see Table 1 in which the data has been compiled from Abkhazskaya oblastnaya organizatsiya kompartii Gruzii v tsifrah. Among the new members accepted into the Abkhazian Party organization between 1939-1943, in average around 50 percent were Georgians whereas around 20 percent were Russians and around 15 percent were Abkhazians. For this data look at the table II in the article, which has been compiled from Abkhazskaya oblastnaya organizatsiya kompartii Gruzii v tsifrah)

<sup>93</sup> Suny (1998), p. 404.

<sup>94</sup> The name of the modern capital of Abkhazia is Sukhumi in Georgian and Sukhum in Abkhaz.

<sup>95</sup> Suny, R. G. (1980). "Georgia and Soviet Nationalist Policy," in S. F. Cohen, A. Rabinowitch & R. Sharlet (ed.), *The Soviet Union Since Stalin*, (pp. 200-226). Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, p. 211. Also see Suny (1998), p. 32. On the other side, the concessions given to non-Georgians did fail to provide a wide range of freedom. For instance, broadcasting was limited to a few hours per week see Hewitt (1995), p. 58.

various fields,<sup>96</sup> yet still fell short of avoiding public disturbances in Abkhazia to come to the fore periodically.

On the other side, provoked with the fear to lose their privileged status after Stalin, Georgians held demonstrations in 1956, which ended with the bloody intervention of Soviet troops and tanks.<sup>97</sup> In late 1970s, Georgians began to campaign more passionately for their national and linguistic rights,<sup>98</sup> even demanding secession from the Union. In April 1978, hundreds of people, mainly students, demonstrated in Tbilisi to protest a government plan attempting to amend Georgian's status as the state language.<sup>99</sup> Following this event, a package of concessions, primarily in the cultural sphere, was given to Georgians, which drove them to consolidate their privileged status and their threatening stance against non-Georgians.

In the meantime, tensions between Abkhazians and Georgians had become particularly evident in 1956, 1964 and 1967 but tensions came to a head in late 1977 with the discussions over the drafting process of the 'Brezhnev' constitution. In December 1977, around 130 Abkhazian intellectuals signed a letter of 'collective protest' and sent it to the CPSU Central Committee and to the Supreme Soviet of USSR. Following this, in May 1978 thousands of Abkhazians gathered in the village of Lykhny in support of this letter and demanding the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia.<sup>100</sup> In order to relieve Abkhazians' anxieties, Moscow gave some concessions, such as transforming Sukhum(i) Pedagogical Institute into an

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<sup>96</sup> Coppieters, B. (2004). "Chapter 5: The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict", *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 5:1.

<sup>97</sup> Tuminez (Fall 2003), p. 12; Suny (1989), p. 303 and Suny (1980) p. 210-211.

<sup>98</sup> At the end of 1970s, Georgian press published many articles demanding more Georgian publications and more comprehensive Georgian instruction. See Sheeby, A. (1978) "The National Languages and the New Constitutions of the Transcaucasian Republics", RFE-RL, 97/78, pp. 1-12; Fuller, E. (1980) "Manifestations of Nationalism in Current Georgian-Language Literature", RFE-RL, 106/80, pp. 1-6

<sup>99</sup> In the midst of the amendments in the Soviet constitution, the Georgian government attempted to change the clause which proclaimed Georgians as the sole state language, replacing it with a new clause that would give Russian and other all languages in the republic, including Georgian the same status. Suny, R. G. (1996b). "On the Road to Independence: Cultural Cohesion and Ethnic Revival in a Multinational Society," in R. G. Suny (ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*. The University of Michigan Press, p. 393. Also see Cornell (2000), p. 142 and Suny (1989), p. 309.

<sup>100</sup> Jones (1994), p. 292 and Sheeby, A (1978) "Recent Events in Abkhazia Mirror the Complexities of National Relations in the USSR, RL 141/78, June 26 1978)

Abkhazian State University and establishing high quotas for Abkhaz students.<sup>101</sup> Yet, with respect to Abkhazia's status as an Autonomous Republic, there was no manifested alteration.

Approaching mid-1980s, the situation in Georgia was increasingly chaotic and complicated. For years now, minorities, and most notably the Abkhazian people opposed the perceived oppressive rule of the Georgian state, consistently criticizing Georgian administration for mistreatment and exploitation. Being the most vocal and vociferous ethnicity in demanding national rights and cultural and political autonomy, Abkhazians constantly showed their reaction against what they perceived as the 'Georgianization' of their communities. On the other hand, Georgians believed that the Abkhazians were given preferential treatment, but their biggest concern at the time was reacting to the Russification policies and protecting their national rights and the status of Georgia. Thus, by the 1980s some extent of Georgianization policies had been implemented by the Georgian authorities toppled with certain attempts to embark on a revival of Georgian language and culture, yet the Georgian politicians and intelligentsia would find the opportunities to express their national identity only after Gorbachev came to power in Moscow.

#### **3.2.4 Gorbachev Era: Rise of Hopes; Fall of an Empire:**

After Gorbachev came to power in Kremlin, he devoted himself to make a radical difference in the SU's system. During the first three years of his era, together with his supporters, he began to carry out large-scale political, economic and social reforms, known as *perestroika* and *glasnost*.<sup>102</sup> In particular, Gorbachev was willing to create conditions for independent public opinion, which he saw as a prerequisite for democracy, and to loosen the hold of the center over the local administrations and political elites. Yet what he failed to take

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<sup>101</sup> High quotas were given due to Abkhaz criticism on Georgians' privileges in terms of accessing higher education. In 1969-1970, among the students in higher education, 82.6 percent were the Georgians who made up around 70 percent of the population. See Suny (1989), p. 304 cited from Dobson: Georgia and the Georgians in Zev Katz (ed.), *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, New York, the Fress Press, 1975, p. 163.

<sup>102</sup> Cohen, S. F. (1989). "Introduction: Gorbachev and the Soviet Reformation," in S. F. Cohen & K. V. Heuvel (ed.), *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers*, (pp. 13-32). New York: Norton & Compan.

into account was that conceding too much independence to union republics and their autonomous regions would “*unleash pent-up nationalist aspirations and ethnic hatreds in the vast multinational Soviet*”<sup>103</sup> and would grant space to increasing or emerging nationalisms based on ethnic lines. Revival of national consciousness in these entities was instrumental in bringing the collapse of the Soviet Union and thereby the emergence of new sovereign states and breakaway regions inheriting the ethnic problems of the past.

Freedoms introduced by glasnost and perestroika provided the opportunities for the national elites of the titular nationalities in Georgia, notably of Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians, to establish national and regional organizations and ethnically based political parties. Moreover, they paved the way for these titular nationalities to use nationalism as their biggest weapon in order to access greater control on local administrative structures and to legitimize their demands towards more autonomy and even independence. In an atmosphere of ethnic upheaval, further eradication of central power raised the stakes of ethnic competition and led the local national authorities to implement policies beneficial only to their own communities.

In Georgia, the radicals that formed the first political organizations with national connotations, namely the Helsinki Union Ilia Chavchavadze Society, were ironically the ex-dissidents and human rights activists of 1970s and of early 1980s, notably Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostova, Giorgi Tchanturia and Irakli Tseretli.<sup>104</sup> Pursuing extreme nationalism with sharp critiques of the Soviet rule and getting the support of the masses, these radicals began to organize strikes, protests and demonstrations with the attendance of thousands of people.<sup>105</sup> Although the Georgian Communist Party was employing an ‘official

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>104</sup> Hunter (1994), p. 115-116 and Aves (1992) p. 158-159.

<sup>105</sup> For example in November 1988, in Tbilisi around 200,000 people demonstrated against the proposed amendments to the USSR’s constitution which would sort of limit Georgia’s sovereignty. See Aves J. (1991). *Paths to National Independence in Georgia 1987-1990*, London: School of Slavic and east European Studies, University of London.



nationalism' encouraged by Georgian political elites in order to broaden its support base, the political victory of the radical nationalist movement was unavoidable. Nevertheless, the elections in October 1990 that made Zviad Gamsakhurdia's Round Table-Free Georgia bloc the leading party to the new Georgian Supreme Soviet marked the end of the communist power in Georgia and eventually transformed Georgia's political and ideological profile.

After Gamsakhurdia came to power, he orchestrated exclusive policies coupled with the slogan of 'Georgia for Georgians'. He not only implemented policies of homogenization, but also intensely campaigned on the rights of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, Georgia was preoccupied with terminating Moscow's central control and with obtaining their full sovereignty. As Moscow lost power, Georgians grabbed the opportunity to hold a republic-wide referendum on independence, finally declaring its independence on April 9, 1991.<sup>106</sup> Gamsakhurdia became the first president of Georgia in May 1991 receiving 87 percent of votes; however his presidency lasted very brief since he was ousted by the military coup in December 1991.<sup>107</sup>

Relations between Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia had deteriorated rapidly in the last years of the Soviet rule. Due to the subjection of increasing Georgianization policies, Abkhazia and South Ossetia took a more ethnic stance against Georgia, simultaneous to the Georgian anti-Soviet campaign. As Ronald Grigor Suny stated, in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, "*the titular nationality had a dominant, though contested political weight that was increasingly becoming intolerable to nationalist Georgians.*"<sup>108</sup> Besides, the fact that Abkhazia and South Ossetia posed a challenge to Georgian independence outlined by their

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<sup>106</sup> Tuminez (Fall 2003), p. 110 and Hunter (1994), p. 119, Since they no longer considered themselves a part of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia refused to participate in the Georgian referendum on independence. See Cornell (2000), p. 155.

<sup>107</sup> Gamsakhurdia at the time was not only criticized by minorities of the republic, but also by the opposition in an atmosphere of absence of compromise. The fact that Gamsakhurdia had great extent of popular support, whereas the opposition had almost no social base, contributed to Gamsakhurdia's hegemonic attitude increasing the animosity between government and opposition. Thus opposition hand in hand with "armed formations" led by Ioseliani and Kitovani ousted Gamsakhurdia by force. See Cornell (2000), p. 157

<sup>108</sup> Suny, R. G. (1996c). "Conclusion" in R. G. Suny (ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, The University of Michigan Press, p. 510.

desire to remain within the SU and thus Moscow could exploit these conflicts against Georgia, further increased the Georgian hostility towards these regions. Eventually, not only had Georgia started to seek independence, but also South Ossetia and Abkhazia began to look for secession from Georgia, their popular fronts, respectively Ademon Nykhas (Popular Shrine) and Aydglara (Unity) becoming the main vehicles for this goal.<sup>109</sup>

Georgia had taken some steps to make Georgian the sole language for public use, which had angered both South Ossetians and Abkhazians. In response, in early September 1989, Ossetian authorities attempted to give equal status to Russian, Georgian and Ossetian and then declared Ossetian as the state language of the oblast. Moreover, the Ademon Nykhas sent a petition to Moscow asking for South Ossetia's unification with North Ossetia.<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, Gamsakhurdia and other Georgian nationalists were organizing demonstrations in Sukhum(i) and Tskhinvali defending the rights of the Georgian population in these regions.<sup>111</sup> The situation steadily worsened after the Georgian government abrogated South Ossetia's autonomous province status in December 1990, following South Ossetian Soviet's demand to stay within the USSR and to upgrade its status.<sup>112</sup> Moscow announced the annulment of sovereignty claims made by both Georgia and South Ossetia.<sup>113</sup> However, Moscow was no longer potent enough to avoid the declaration of the Georgian Supreme Soviet affirming its right to secede from the Union.<sup>114</sup> Consequently, skirmishes broke out in Tskhinvali in April 1991 in which Soviet militia units and troops came to restore order and to maintain peace.

On the other side, by 1988 Abkhazians intensified their activities towards separation from Georgian SSR. In that respect, in June 1988, a group of leading Abkhazian figures sent a letter of grievances against Georgians to the 19th Party Conference in Moscow and in March

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<sup>109</sup> Aves (1992), p. 161.

<sup>110</sup> (Art. 33, pg. 153)

<sup>111</sup> The 'March on Tskhinvali' orchestrated by Georgian radicals led by Gamsakhurdia on 23 September 1989, further increased the tensions between Ossetians and Georgians of South Ossetia.(Art. 33, pg. 153)

<sup>112</sup> Aves (1992), p. 172.

<sup>113</sup> Clines, F. X. (1991, April 9). "In Soviet Georgia, Threat of Strike," *NYTimes*, from [www.nytimes.org](http://www.nytimes.org).

<sup>114</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 154.

1989, more than 30,000 people signed a petition at a mass meeting at the town of Lykhny organized by Aidgylara, in both cases calling on Moscow to alter the status of Abkhazia to that of a union republic.<sup>115</sup> The first large-scale clashes erupted between Georgians and Abkhazians in March 1989 preceding the even more violent fighting that broke out in July 1989 due to the Georgian attempt to establish a branch of Tbilisi University in Sukhum(i) with the aim to serve the needs of Georgian students.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, in August 1990, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet declared the sovereignty of Abkhazia, in the absence of its Georgian deputies, but failed to mention about its relationship with Georgia.<sup>117</sup> After the historian Vladislav Ardzinba was chosen as the Chairman of the Abkhazian Soviet in December, Abkhazians became even more unwilling to remain an autonomous region within Georgia.

As the Soviet system approached its collapse, Gorbachev's last hope was the referendum on March 17, 1991, on the new 'Union Treaty' which would preserve the Union of Soviet Republics as a renewed federation. Georgia not only refused to participate in the referendum, but also banned its autonomous territories from taking part.<sup>118</sup> However, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia participated in the referendum and voted in favor of the preservation of the Union.<sup>119</sup> Yet, it was soon realized that the maintenance of a strong centralized Soviet Union was increasingly futile. With the Belocezhkaya Pushcha agreement in December 1991, the Union was replaced with the CIS in which eleven republics joined, excluding Georgia.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Aves (1992), p. 160

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p. 160.

<sup>117</sup> "Report of a UNPO Mission to Abkhazia, Georgia and the Northern Caucasus," (Nov. 1992). Available (pdf) at [http://www.unpo.org/downloads/Abkhazia\\_Georgia\\_report\\_1992.pdf](http://www.unpo.org/downloads/Abkhazia_Georgia_report_1992.pdf)

<sup>118</sup> The referendum was on the question "Do you consider it necessary the preservation of the Union of SSR as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics, in which the rights and freedom of an individual of any nationality will be full guaranteed?" See Suny (1998), p. 479.

<sup>119</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 155.

<sup>120</sup> (For more information about the dissolution period and the formation of CIS, see Wilson, A. (1996). "The Post-Soviet States and the Nationalities Question" in G. Smith (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), *The Nationalities Question in the Post-Soviet States*, (pp. 23-43). NY: Longman, p. 24-25.

### **3.3 The New Georgian State**

#### **3.3.1 Georgia on the Edge of Collapse**

As it became clear that the dismantling of the Union was unavoidable, Abkhazians and Ossetians wanted to make sure that their sovereignties would be preserved. It seems clear that the exclusive Georgian attitude resulted in further radicalization of their attitudes and made political compromise almost impossible. Georgian government failed not only to frustrate the secessionist ambitions of Abkhazia and Ossetia, but also to establish its political authority on these two communities. Eventually, the chaotic situation in both regions was unavoidable.

#### **War in South Ossetia**

The skirmishes that began in South Ossetia in the beginning of 1991 culminated into open warfare that lasted for approximately 18 months, resulting in the deaths of hundreds and the migration of thousands. During the war, North Ossetians sided with their ethnic brethren, cutting off a Russian natural gas pipeline heading towards Tbilisi, as well as strongly lobbying in favor of South Ossetia.<sup>121</sup> The conflict only came to an end with the signing of Sochi Ceasefire Agreement in June 1992 between the Russian President Yeltsin and Shevardnadze in the presence of both North and South Ossetian leaders who nevertheless did not constitute the signatories.<sup>122</sup> The agreement foresaw the establishment of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) to monitor the ceasefire and to assist the demilitarization efforts in the region.<sup>123</sup> After its first meeting, JCC on a tripartite basis, including representatives from Russia, Georgia and North Ossetia, decided to deploy Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) consisting of a Russian, a Georgian and a North Ossetian battalion.<sup>124</sup> In 1994, the JCC mechanism changed into a quadripartite basis by the formal participation of South Ossetia.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 158

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>123</sup> Reeve, R. (2006) "The OSCE Mission to Georgia and the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict: An Overview of Activities", *Helsinki Monitor*, no:1, p. 57.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 58

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

Eventually, South Ossetia was divided into South Ossetian and Georgian controlled territories, monitored by peacekeeping forces of four parties. Up until 2004, uncertainty and insecurity prevailed, but nevertheless devoid of a serious escalation in bloody conflicts.

### **War in Abkhazia**

On the other hand, in Abkhazia the tensions between Georgians and Abkhazians mounted in February 1992, where the Military Council of Georgia led by Shevardnadze abolished Georgia's 1978 Constitution and rather reinstated the 1921 Constitution in which the nature of the relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia was never specified.<sup>126</sup> In response to Georgia's decision, as a temporary measure the Abkhazian parliament reinstated the 1925 Abkhazian Constitution by which Abkhazia's status was co-equal with Georgia on the basis of a special-union treaty.<sup>127</sup> Not surprisingly, the Georgian parliament immediately declared its annulment of Abkhazia's decision. On the other hand, the parliament in Abkhazia was in a state of paralysis due to the confrontation of Georgian deputies on one side and Abkhazian and other non-Georgian deputies on the other. Discontented with the unilateral acts of the Abkhazian parliament, the Georgian deputies of Abkhazia walked out from the parliament building in Sukhum(i) in early August.<sup>128</sup> On 12 August 1992, just two days before the war broke out in Abkhazia, the Abkhazian parliament sent an appeal to the Georgian parliament to initiate discussions on the draft treaty prepared by the Abkhazian side on the possible future federative relations with Georgia.<sup>129</sup> However, this proposal failed to meet with approval in Tbilisi. The conflict in Abkhazia moved to a bloody climax as Georgian units commanded by Tengiz Kitovani, the then defense minister and former leader

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<sup>126</sup> 1921 Constitution had been introduced by the independent Menshevik Georgia. See "Report of a UNPO Coordinated Human Rights Mission to Abkhazia and Georgia," (Nov/Dec 1992). Retrieved from [http://www.unpo.org/downloads/Abkhazia\\_Georgia-report-1992\\_pdf](http://www.unpo.org/downloads/Abkhazia_Georgia-report-1992_pdf)

<sup>127</sup> "Report of a UNPO Mission to Abkhazia" (Nov. 2002)

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. In particular, the appeal suggested that "*address the extent of power and responsibilities of separate Abkhazian and Georgian governments and those of their future joint (etc. federal bodies)*" For the full text of the draft treaty see the appendix in the article.

of a paramilitary organization named the Georgian National Guard, entered Sukhum(i) on 14 August.<sup>130</sup> The Georgian official explanation to justify the deployment was the protection of the railways and highways and to free Georgian officials who were taken hostage by the supporters of ousted President Gamsakhurdia, the so-called Zviadists.<sup>131</sup> As a response, Abkhazians claimed that Georgia was using these reasons as pretexts to crush the separatist movement in Abkhazia. As Abkhazians were ill-prepared for a sudden military attack, Georgian troops easily took control of Sukhum(i). A ceasefire was signed in July 1993 with the initiative of President Yeltsin; however it failed due to the reluctance of both Abkhazia and Georgia to withdraw their forces and resign their weapons.<sup>132</sup>

Although by mid-1993 Georgian forces were still occupying the capital and the port, Abkhazians did not concede the remaining large parts of the region. During the war, non-Georgian communities of Abkhazia sided with Abkhazians and thus Abkhazian troops did not only consist of Abkhazians, but also of Russians, Armenians and other non-Georgians living in Abkhazia. As the war prolonged the Abkhazian position began to strengthen, mainly due to the flow of volunteers from Russia's North Caucasus, including large groups of Chechens, Circassians and Ossetians. Additionally, many Turkish Abkhazians, who passed the border from Turkey, arrived in Abkhazia to fight Georgians.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, the Russian military allegedly was assisting Abkhazia providing the Abkhazian army with heavy weapons and artillery and in fact participating in air-attacks on Georgian targets.<sup>134</sup>

In mid-1993, Georgian territorial integrity was also threatened by a civil-war within its borders led by Zviadist militia who staged an open revolt in Western Georgia, particularly in

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<sup>130</sup> See "Russia: Georgia Lurches towards Civil War with Rebel Region", 14 August 1992., *Reuters*.

<sup>131</sup> See "Rebels Attack Troops in Georgian Province," 20 August 1992, *NYTimes*. [www.nytimes.org](http://www.nytimes.org).

<sup>132</sup> See Erlanger, S. (1992, 4 September) "Post-Soviet Unrest: 1 Truce, 1 Deadlock," *NYTimes*, from [www.nytimes.org](http://www.nytimes.org). Also see Hewitt (1995), p. 61-64.

<sup>133</sup> Hewitt (1995), p. 62

<sup>134</sup> "Georgian Helicopter Crush Widens Schism with Russia," October 6 1992, *NYTimes* and "Georgian Asks for Weapons; Warns of War with Russia," March 18 1993, *NYTimes*. Available at [www.nytimes.org](http://www.nytimes.org).

Mingrelia and succeeded in gaining control over the region.<sup>135</sup> As the Georgian army was troubled with Zviadist forces, Abkhazians grasped the opportunity and initiated a surprise offensive attack in mid-September recapturing their provincial capital, Sukhum(i) and restored their control in almost all of the former Abkhazian ASSR's territory with the exception of the upper reaches of K'odor Valley and some parts in the Gali region.<sup>136</sup>

After Abkhazians forces drove the Georgian army out in 1993, a ceasefire was signed in October 1993 with the mediation of Russia that drew a ceasefire line along the Inguri River and introduced CIS peacekeeping forces.<sup>137</sup> Since then, Abkhazians have retained their authority over their region, without avoiding however relatively small-scale incidents like kidnappings, murders and skirmishes mainly between Georgian and Abkhazian militias. For years, the mountainous Kodori Gorge that lies in northwestern Georgia, adjacent to Sukhum(i) has remained the only territory of the region under Georgian control and has been the most dangerous terrain in the area, host to numerous battles between the two sides and resurfacing fears over a renewed war. Particularly, the Georgian guerilla attacks in May 1998 and October 2001 in the Gali region resulting in the killings of Abkhazian police and militia were interpreted by the Abkhazian side as failed attempts to restore Georgian control over Abkhazia.<sup>138</sup> The fragile situation was aggravated once more in August 2002 as Abkhazian guerilla fighters launched operations in upper Kodori Gorge.<sup>139</sup> Since then, sporadic clashes continued to erupt in Abkhazia, especially along the Inguri River sharply deteriorating the

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<sup>135</sup> Coppieters (2004).

<sup>136</sup> Lynch, D. (2000b). "Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan," New York: Palgrave Publishers (Royal Institute of International Affairs), p. 137.

<sup>137</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 162.

<sup>138</sup> (See, RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 26 May and 9 June 1998, Kishovsky, S. (2001, 5 October) "Abkhazia: Fighting in a Breakaway Region," The Jamestown Monitor, 19 May 1998, Wines, M. (2001, 12 October) "Abkhazia: Rebel Zone Bombed", NYTimes.

<sup>139</sup> United Nations Association of Georgia (UNAG). 14 August 2002. "Georgia: Abkhaz Side Refuses to Pull Out From Kodori: Tbilisi Fears to Lose the Only Georgian Enclave in Breakaway Province." <http://www.reliefweb.int>

security situation in the region. The on-going armed clashes and tensions also made it harder for UN officials to function in the area, confronted by military attacks and hostage crises.<sup>140</sup>

### **3.3.2 Analyzing Shevardnadze: Fragile Balance between West and Russia**

In his previous years of rule, Shevardnadze had been troubled by the simultaneous escalation of the insurgence of the Zviadist movement in Western Georgia and with wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Realizing that the Zviadist movement was a large threat to the already fragile nation-state building process of Georgia, he asked Russia for help. However, as Ghia Nodia stated, *“joining the CIS and further compliance with Russia’s geopolitical aspirations was the price to be paid.”*<sup>141</sup> After Georgia reluctantly signed up for membership to CIS and signed a number of treaties with Russia, Russia began to guard Georgia’s border with Turkey and establish military bases all over Georgia. Georgia trusted in Russia that it would hand over the Abkhazian separatist leader, Ardzinba and give Abkhazia back to Georgia.<sup>142</sup> However, in the following years Georgian expectations and predictions fell into the drain. Georgia not only could not establish its control over its separatist regions, but also could not avoid Russia’s interference into its domestic and external politics.

On the other hand, Shevardnadze was admired by the West due to his diplomatic career, his western attitude and civilized manner. During his period, Georgia’s relations with the United States and Western Europe improved to a great extent. However, in contrast to Shevardnadze’s expectations, neither Europe nor the US intervened in the conflicts, both failing to restrain Russia’s ensuing manipulation. Although, Shevardnadze normalized Georgia’s relations with its neighbors, reduced crime and corruption and took generous steps side with the Western camp, he could neither succeed to convince separatist regimes to unite

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<sup>140</sup> “UN monitors shot down on Abkhazian mission,” 9 October 2001, *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk.world/2001/oct/09/02> and see also Chanadiri, G. (2003, 10 June). “Hostage Crisis On”, *Civil Georgia*. Retrieved from [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)

<sup>141</sup> Nodia, G. (1998). “The Georgian Perception of the West,” in B. Coppieters, D. Trenin & Alexei Zverev (ed.), *Commonwealth and Independence in post-Soviet Euroasia*, (pp. 12-43), London: Frank Cass Publishers, p. 32.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.



with Georgia in a federal framework nor to secure the return of Georgian IDPs back to Abkhazia. As stated by Jones & Parsons, “*Shevardnadze managed to save the Georgian ship of state when it was perilously close to sinking, but gave it very little direction.*”<sup>143</sup>

### **3.3.3 Saakashvili Era**

#### **Saakashvili’s Mission of Re-Unifying Georgia and Escalation of Tensions in South Ossetia**

On November 2003, Shevardnadze was pressured to resign following the mass anti-Shevardnadze slogans and the strong opposition movement led by his successor Mikhail Saakashvili.<sup>144</sup> After coming to power with this peaceful power change described as the ‘Rose Revolution’, Saakashvili made establishing Georgian territorial integrity a priority. His first political triumph was driving out Adjara’s<sup>145</sup> autocratic leader Aslan Abashidze and restoring Georgian control over the province. This victory made him more determined to reassert authority and control in the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In his speech to Adjarians in Batumi, he articulated his objective as: “*I congratulate everyone on this victory, on the beginning of Georgia’s unification. Georgia will be united.*”<sup>146</sup>

Tensions between Ossetians and Georgians began to escalate in the summer of 2004 as it soon became clear that South Ossetia would be Saakashvili’s next target. Saakashvili was interested in regulating and monitoring trade within Tshkinvali in order to prevent smuggling and to achieve economic integration of the region. In line with this policy, Georgian authorities attempted to close down the large Erghneti market known to be used for

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<sup>143</sup> Jones & Parsons (1996), p. 309

<sup>144</sup> Sepashvili, G. (2003, 24 November). “Rose Revolution’ in pictures”, *Civil Georgia*. Available at [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)

<sup>145</sup> Adjara is an autonomous region within Georgia, lying in the western part of Georgia, sharing borders with Turkey. Despite Adjarians are ethnically considered Georgian, they are distinct from Georgians in central Georgia in terms of religion. Muslim Adjarians have had substantial autonomy during the Soviet era. Following the foundation of the Georgian state, they preserved their regional autonomy, diminishing Tbilisi’s control on the territory. The long-term leader Abashidze had achieved to provide his personal control over Adjara, acting as its central authority, overriding Tbilisi’s power in the region. Yet, it is significant to mention that Adjara has never sought secession from Georgia, but rather has chosen to remain a part of it.

<sup>146</sup> Geary, J., Womack H. and Utiashvili S. (2004, 17 May), “In the Name of Rose”, *Time South Pacific*, (Australia/New Zealand edition), Issue: 19, pg. 45. From EbscoHOST database.

unregulated trade and to block the roads between Georgia and South Ossetia by activating military and police services.<sup>147</sup> Also, in July Georgian officials intercepted a Russian cargo on its way to Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali fearing that the weapons would be handed to South Ossetian militants.<sup>148</sup> These Georgian attempts triggered the South Ossetian reaction, resulting in an exchange of fire and the deaths of dozens. The ceasefire signed in August 2004 succeeded in bringing an end to the violence, but not a sustainable solution, as South Ossetia has remained a break-away province in which violence has been flaring sporadically with numerous incidents including provocations and occasional skirmishes.

### **Saakashvili's Peace Proposal for South Ossetia**

Especially, during the last decade, there were attempts to resolve the conflict in South Ossetia, which were encouraged not only by the international community, but also by the conflicting parties and Russia. 'Memorandum on Measures for Providing Security and Mutual Trust' signed between the two parties in May 1996 and the "*Russian-Georgian inter-governmental agreement on cooperation in restoring the economy in South Ossetia and on the return of refugees*" of December 2000 had increased the hopes for the peaceful resolution of the conflict.<sup>149</sup> The biggest Georgian effort for conflict resolution in South Ossetia was the introduction of a peace plan on September 2004 by President Saakashvili, as he outlined a three-stage plan including (1) confidence building between the two countries: (2) demilitarization, decriminalization of conflict areas and increased role for the international community and (3) establishment of a broad autonomy for South Ossetia.<sup>150</sup> Although it received wide praise from the international community, it fell short of South Ossetian President Kokoiti's demands and was eventually rejected by South Ossetian authorities.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Khutsishvili (2006), p. 296

<sup>148</sup> Myers, S. L. (2004, 30 July). "Georgians and Separatists exchange fire," *NYTimes*. Available online.

<sup>149</sup> Markedonov, S. (Sep. 2008). "Caucasus Conflict Breaks Old Rules of the Game," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no: 45, pp. 2-5, Available at [www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/](http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/)

<sup>150</sup> Reeve (2006), p. 64

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64

### 3.3.4 'Alternative Elections' and 'Parallel Structures'

On 12 November 2006, South Ossetians went to the polls to vote for the referendum confirming the independence of South Ossetia with an overwhelming 'yes', re-electing Eduardo Kokoity as their president. However, neither the Georgian government nor the international community recognized the referendum results.<sup>152</sup> On the other hand, the same day in South Ossetia, an alternative referendum and alternative presidential elections were held, supported by the Georgian government and the Ossetian opposition to Kokoity's regime, the Salvation Union of South Ossetia. In these 'alternative elections' ethnic Georgians and a relatively small group of Ossetians voted in favor of launching negotiations with Georgia on the status of South Ossetia and elected Dimitri Sanakoev, former South Ossetian prime minister fired by Kokoity in 2001, as their president.<sup>153</sup> Since Kokoity and the separatists did not show interest in Saakashvili's peace proposals, Georgian authorities aimed to initiate negotiation talks with this parallel administration. In that respect, in May 2007 the Georgian parliament passed a resolution to establish 'Provisional Administrative Entity of South Ossetia'; and appointed the 'alternative president' Dimitri Sanakoev as its head.<sup>154</sup>

On the other hand, in Abkhazia the Georgian government had never recognized the Abkhazian parliament in Sukhum(i) claiming that it had no jurisdiction over Abkhazia, since it failed to represent the majority of the Abkhazia, excluding 200,000 Georgian IDPs who fled from Abkhazia to other parts of Georgia following the war in 1993. Rather an 'exile government of Abkhazia' was set up in Tbilisi in March 1994 by the former Georgian deputies of Abkhazia. In line with its policy of establishing 'alternative regimes' to separatist

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<sup>152</sup> The European Union stated that it did not recognize the referendum since it contradicted Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. On the other hand, the Council of Europe denounced the referendum as "*unnecessary, unhelpful and unfair*". See "South Ossetia votes for Independence", 12 November 2006, *BBC*. From the website <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6140448.stm>

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

authorities, in late 2006 Georgia announced to form the Abkhazia's legitimate government in Upper Abkhazia., moving the Abkhazian government-in-exile from Tbilisi to the region.<sup>155</sup>

### 3.3.5 Emergence of Russian-Georgian Confrontation and its Implications

In recent years, the tensions between Russia and Georgia ran high culminating in the most dangerous confrontation between the two sides since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Rising animosity between Russia and Georgia was primarily a by-product of the unresolved conflict between Georgia and its breakaway regions. The already fragile Russian-Georgian relations of the 1990s reached an unprecedented high in the millennium following a number of incidents, clashes, threats and counter-threats. In August 2004 Georgia threatened to sink the ships including the ones ferrying Russian tourists approaching to Abkhazia whereas Russian Foreign Ministry announced that any actions against Russian ships would be regarded as a “*hostile act with all the ensuing consequences*”.<sup>156</sup> Starting with Russia's decision to increase the price of gas supplies to Georgia in January 2006, while later issuing a ban on Georgian wine and mineral water, the most important Georgian export products, Georgian-Russian relations headed towards a downward spiral. Following the arrests of four Russian military officers whom Georgia had accused of espionage in October 2006, Kremlin ordered Russian troops to ‘*shoot to kill*’ in the case of an attack to their military bases in Georgia, launching a multitude of sanctions on Georgia and recalling its ambassador from Tbilisi.<sup>157</sup> Due to provocations from both sides, fears mounted in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia as well, putting an end to the peace process. In June 2007, gunfire erupted once again

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<sup>155</sup> Saradzhyan, S. (2006, 27 November). “Maneuvering in Abkhazia, South Ossetia,” Commentary for ISN Security Watch. Retrieved from <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=16964>

<sup>156</sup> Myers, S. L. and Shanker (T.) (2004, 5 August) “Violence Flares Again in 2 Separatist Regions of Georgia,” *NYTimes*. Available online.

<sup>157</sup> See “Furious Moscow orders 'shoot to kill' as Georgia crisis escalates,” 2 October 2006 , *The Guardian*; Parfitt, T. (2006, 3 October), “Russia escalates Gergia row despite release of ‘spies’,” *The Guardian* and also see Mainville, M. (2006, 28 September), “Russia recalls ambassador from Georgia,” *The Guardian*.

between ethnic Georgians and South Ossetians in South Ossetia. Russian planes allegedly were involved in attacks on Georgian targets.<sup>158</sup>

Encouraged with Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and its recognition by more than 40 countries, including United States and most EU countries, South Ossetia and Abkhazia increased their efforts for recognition claiming Kosovo would set a precedent for them on legal grounds. In April 2008, Russia declared that it would expand its support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as establishing diplomatic ties with the regions' separatist authorities.<sup>159</sup> Following a short period, tensions flared up between Russia and Georgia as both sides accused each other for building up military forces along the disputed border of Abkhazia. Georgia was concerned with the increase of Russian peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia without its consent whereas Russia claimed that Georgia was planning a military attack on the region and "*amassed more than 1500 troops to mountainous Upper Kodori Valley*".<sup>160</sup> Although for long signals were present for the most dangerous military confrontation between Russia and Georgia in recent years, it was nevertheless a surprise for everyone when Russian troops marched into South Ossetia in early August.

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<sup>158</sup> Smith, D. J. (1927, 24 June). "Russian Attack on Georgia: Time to Speak Out", Saati (Tbilisi).

<sup>159</sup> Chivers, C. J. (2008, 17 April). "Russia Expands Support for Breakaway Regions in Georgia," *NYTimes*.

<sup>160</sup> Levy, C. F. (2008, 30 April), "World Briefing: Georgia-Russia Tensions Rise, *NYTimes* and Harding, L. (2008, 29 April). "Russia accuses Georgia of plans to invade breakaway regions," guardian.co.uk.

## **4. Long-Term Conflict Prolonging Factors**

### **4.1 Introducing the Legacy of the Past**

Ironically, during the Tsarist Russian period, the biggest perceived enemy for Abkhazians, as well as for other non-Georgians, had not been Georgians, but rather Russians, as they were faced with the restrictive and suppressive policies imposed by the Russian center. The foundation of the Menshevik Georgian Republic had generated not only the first phase of ‘Georgian nationalism’, but also the genesis of ethnic competition, hatred and regional tensions. Throughout the Soviet era, the hostility between Georgians and Abkhazian and Ossetians had flared with the flourishing of a hard-lined Georgian nationalism and the simultaneous emergence of vocal and strong Abkhazian and Ossetian nationalisms. The characteristics of these three versions of nationalisms had very much in common as they all grasped the opportunities provided by the Soviet federal system, though while Georgian nationalism was a counter-measure to Russifying aspects of the imposed ‘Soviet culture’, Ossetians and Abkhazians developed their nationalisms in juxtaposition to the Georgian identity.

Aside to the heightening of ethnic consciousness, the administrative system of SU with ethno-territorial divisions provided them autonomous territories and thereby their own local administrative structures, from which around they could mobilize their peoples, facilitating the exacerbation of the arising tensions. Furthermore, in the particular Abkhazian case, the Georgian settlement policies combined with perceived ‘assimilation’ have been an important driving force for Abkhazians to secure their control over their region and ultimately to seek secession from Georgia.

It is significant to highlight here, that the legacy of the Soviet administrative system, as well as the legacy of the past ethnic tensions, nationalist tendencies, competing demands and ethno-demographic shifts have not only been the main reasons for the eruption of the

conflicts in the early 1990s, but have also remained as major forces driving the existence of today's *de facto* Abkhaz and Ossetian states, and as significant factors impeding the conflict resolution process, given that they have shaped perceptions, created 'memories' and generated 'enemy' images, diminishing the level of trust and confidence between the conflicting sides.

#### **4.2 Legacy of the Soviet Nationalities Question and Emergence of Nationalisms**

When the SU was founded in the early 1920s, it was designed as a multi-ethnic federation with four hierarchical levels of regional administrative units constructed on ethno-territorial lines. In other words, the basis of Soviet system was based not on simply geographical entities, but rather '*national-territorial states*', in which the titular nationalities were identified by a particular autonomous territory and an administrative unit.<sup>161</sup> In addition to this system which drew rigid boundaries between ethnicities, the Kremlin implemented the policy of registration of one's ethnic origin on internal passports and introduced *korenizatsiaa*, which promoted the establishment of national-cultural institutions, as well as the preferential treatment of titular-nationalities, "*treating nationality as an ascriptive characteristic determined by birth.*"<sup>162</sup> These in turn led to the emergence and development of solid ethnic identities, indeed placed 'ethnicity' as the main criteria for social identity, overriding all other forms of social identities.<sup>163</sup> Whatever the intensions of the Soviet nationalities policy were,<sup>164</sup> it eventually elevated ethnic consciousness, consolidated national

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<sup>161</sup> Zaslavsky, V. (1994). "Success and collapse: traditional Soviet nationality policy," in I. Bremmer & R. Taras (ed.), *Nation and politics in the Soviet successor states*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 31.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>163</sup> Coppieters, B., Malashenko, A. & Waller, M. (1998a), "Introduction," in B. Coppieters, A. Malashenko & M. Waller (ed.), *Conflicting Loyalties and the State in post-Soviet Russia and Eurasia*, (pp. 1-11). London: Frank Cass Publishers, p. 1.

<sup>164</sup> Smith, (1996), p. 7. The author claimed that the Soviet policies aimed to eliminate the national oppression of the nationalities and eventually avoid the disturbances and national aspirations within the boundaries of the federation. Originally, Soviet leaders' intentions were to merge all these nationalities (*silyanie*) and to create a homogeneous and centrally sustained Soviet culture, in which all ethnic and national differences faded away. Coppieters, B. (1998c). "Form and Content in Soviet and Post-Soviet Natonality and Regional Policies," in B. Coppieters, A. Malashenko & M. Waller (ed.), *Conflicting Loyalties and the State in post-Soviet Russia and Eurasia*, (pp. 12-32). London: Frank Cass Publishers, p. 25

identities and provided the titular nationalities with a coherent organizational form to articulate their perceived national aspirations.<sup>165</sup> Most importantly, it contributed to the construction of ethnic nationalisms, which acclaimed the inherited attachments of an individual to national membership.<sup>166</sup>

The emergence of ethnic nationalisms in SU, especially after 1970s, was fueled with the institutionalization of indigenous ethnic leaderships within the territorial administrative units, who have sought to construct nations as a means of legitimizing their rule.<sup>167</sup> Constructing national identities defined around titular nationalities, the ruling elites aimed to adopt nationalism to gain control over the allocation of resources and the governance of the local soviets. The ethnic intelligentsias' aspirations for administrative power combined with the ethnically conscious individuals' demands for cultural and linguistic rights rendered the development of nationalisms in union republics, posing a threat to the solidarity of the Union, as well as breeding ethnic tensions within these union republics.

The exclusive Georgian nationalism had drawn its base from the 'sense of superiority' that has been cultivated by the desire to foster the Georgian identity as the dominant ethnicity and to strengthen the position of Georgians vis-à-vis non-Georgians. Although Georgia for long had been a multi-national landscape with distinct small and ancient ethno-linguistic populations, Georgians in the early 1980s, being the dominant population, have devoted themselves to exclude other nationalities in order to consolidate their national independence and to assert their authority over their territory. The national aspirations towards an independent and unitary Georgian state were initially encouraged "*as a national self-*

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<sup>165</sup> Suny, R. G. (1992). "State, civil society, and ethnic cultural consolidation in the USSR: roots of the national question," in P. Goldman, G. W. Lapidus & V. Zaslavsky (ed.), *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics*, (pp. 22-44). Cambridge University Press, p. 35. Also see Saroyan, M. (1996). "Beyond the Nation-State: Culture and Ethnic Politics in Soviet Transcaucasia," in R. G. Suny (rev. ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, (pp. 401-426). The University of Michigan Press, p. 403-404.

<sup>166</sup> For a brief review on the ideology of the ethnic nationalism see Özkırımlı, U. (2005). *Contemporary Debates on Nationalism: A Critical Engagement*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pg. 22-23)

<sup>167</sup> Tuminez (Fall 2003), p. 86.



*protection against the feared domination of Russian 'higher' culture and its potential for Russification.*"<sup>168</sup> However, the nationalist policies evolved as the constitutive other to the Georgian identity was reconstructed away from Moscow and rather towards the ethnic minorities present in Georgia. The firm Georgian rhetoric developed a 'siege mentality' where any resistance to the dominant Georgian nationalism was perceived as a danger against the newborn Georgian state.<sup>169</sup> Subsequently, Georgians started to blame non-Georgians in Abkhazia and South Ossetia for serving as 'Russian agents' and encouraging Russian expansionism on Georgian soil.<sup>170</sup> Georgia's exclusionary posture was clearly absorbed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and transposed into counter-nationalist tendencies that threatened Georgian national identity and territorial solidarity. In other words, as the perceived threat of Abkhazian and South Ossetian ethnic chauvinism and political dismemberment pushed Georgians to implement harsh policies to vitiate their aspirations, separation became the preferred option for these ethno-regions.<sup>171</sup>

Abkhazians and Ossetians had their own national and territorial grievances, but were directed against the Georgian administration, rather than the central Soviet rule. Although these two communities had enjoyed a large-array of privileges in their local regions, they had felt threatened by the 'Georgian domination', indicating the existence of inequality between them and Georgians. Nationalist challenges over Abkhazia were constantly on the surface throughout the Soviet period, but Ossetians on the other hand had developed a relatively stable relationship with their Georgian neighbors. However, feeling extremely insecure as they faced with rising Georgian nationalism, they too began to demand more cultural equality and access to economic and political power. It was clear that, excluding non-Georgians within

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<sup>168</sup> Toff (Jan. 2001), p. 125.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. p. 125-137.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. p. 137 and Herzing, E. (1999). *The New Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*. New York: Chatham House Papers (The Royal Institute of International Affairs), p. 8.

<sup>171</sup> Toff (Jan. 2001), p. 125.

the unitary republic and treating minorities as ‘aliens’, Georgian nationalism had ultimately paved the way for the emergence of counter-nationalisms in its two autonomous regions.

As Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost legitimated the expression of ethnic claims, it strengthened the hands of nationalists within Georgia and fostered their mobilizations towards secession. Georgian nationalism not only centered on the struggle to gain independence, but also to prevent its autonomous regions’ aspirations for separation. On the other side, facing with Gamsakhurdia’s exclusive Georgian nationalism propagated by the motto ‘Georgia for Georgians’, Abkhazians and South Ossetians felt extremely insecure, and mobilized for liberation from Georgian threat.<sup>172</sup>

Georgian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian nationalisms emerged during the Soviet period had become a strong force driving their attempts for independence in early 1990s culminating ethnic conflicts in the regions. The disturbances driven by nationalist aspirations of Soviet era not only have shaped the course of the wars in early 1990s, but also turned out to be a very powerful legitimating tool for the political leaders of Georgia and of the newly emerged *de facto* states. Although the characteristics of the nationalisms in Abkhazia and South Ossetia evolved over time, the perceived enemy image remained the same, as well as the ultimate goals. Hence, one can claim that in these two *de facto* states the nationalist feelings of the past have constructed today’s memories and future’s great expectations.

### **4.3 Legacy of the Soviet ‘Autonomy’**

As mentioned in the previous section, Soviet administrative system had granted the titular nationalities of the federal units a particular autonomous territory, as well as the “*symbolic attributes of national self-determination.*”<sup>173</sup> These features of the Soviet system created distinctive opportunities for these nationalities to establish a separate state or *de facto* territorial control, following the collapse of the Soviet center, “the *powerful glue that held this*

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<sup>172</sup> Jones (1994), p. 295

<sup>173</sup> Saroyan (1996), p. 404.

*ethnic patchwork together*".<sup>174</sup> The unitary republics, like Georgia, were already afforded 'right to secede' in the Soviet system as a first-level administrative unit and thus had no difficulty to gain international recognition for their new statehoods. On the other hand, some second or third level autonomies, like South Ossetia and Abkhazia, did not accept to remain under control of these new states, but rather used the attributes of Soviet period 'autonomy' to institutionalize their national movements and to create their own territorial entities as *de facto* states. Hence, one can say that autonomy became a contributing factor for the ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space, since these regions had been already constructed in "*manner of states*" with borders, state institutions, state-like symbols and political leaderships essential to any process of statehood, entailing their motivation to mobilize.<sup>175</sup>

On the other side, territorial autonomy within the Soviet federation did not only contribute to these secessionist states' initial *de facto* establishment, but also their continued existence. The fact that past memories of being autonomous in the Soviet system have shaped the way they perceive the concept of 'autonomy' has ultimately enhanced their insistence to deny their home states' offers for a federative arrangement.<sup>176</sup> To elaborate more, today's *de facto* states do not view 'autonomy' as a well-designed structure capable enough to secure their governance and to protect their identities within their territories. Since the Soviet federal system had not granted them any economic or political autonomy, only substantial autonomy on the cultural sphere, they were vulnerable to a strong central control and the suppression associated with it. Svante Cornell states that "*the obvious result of this past is that now that the national minorities have acquired self-rule on their own, often with the use of force, they are extremely reluctant to accept a return to an autonomous status which they now know will*

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<sup>174</sup> Jackson, P. (2004). "Ethnicity, Decentralisation and the Fissile State in Georgia," *Public Administration and Development*, 24, pp. 79.

<sup>175</sup> See Cornell, S. E. (Jan. 2002). "Autonomy as a Source of Conflict: Caucasian Conflicts in Theoretical Perspective", *World Politics*, 54, pp. 245-276.

<sup>176</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 27-31.

*probably never give them the amount of self-determination they have been, or will be, promised.*”<sup>177</sup>

Particularly, South Ossetians and Abkhazians do not share much faith in ‘autonomy’, at least in the implementation of it, believing that they have experienced Georgian oppressive policies and the dilution of the local autonomy during Soviet years, as well as Georgian attempts to reduce their autonomous status. Eventually, the legacy of Soviet ‘autonomy’ made them feel insecure with the idea of a future status in a federative arrangement, leading them to refuse the peace proposals offering autonomy within Georgia. Thus, they chose to preserve their *de facto* subsistence within an entrenched state of conflict.

#### **4.4 Ethno-demographic perspective**

The way Abkhazians and Ossetians interpret history has placed the ethno-demographic perspective at the core of their nationalist aspirations. The ‘demographical’ standing has been particularly important for Abkhazians. Abkhazians claim that they were subject to extensive assimilation policies, as well as Georgianization of their homeland during the Soviet period, which resulted on considerable effects on the demographic balance reducing the proportion of the ethnic Abkhazian population. Anderson and Silver point out that, “*numerical dominance is a vital factor in the relations among ethnic groups; it is both a consequence and a cause of ethnic antipathies and alliances*”.<sup>178</sup> In this framework, one can say that the numerical superiority of Georgians in the pre-war Abkhazia was perceived by Abkhazians as a consequence of Georgian demands to turn Abkhazia into a ‘Georgian land’.<sup>179</sup> The ethno-demographic perspective in the past can also largely explain the present Abkhazian anxieties over the return of Georgian IDPs.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>178</sup> Anderson, B. A. & Silver, B. D. (1996). “Population Redistribution and the Ethnic Balance in Transcaucasia,” in R. G. Suny (rev. ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, (pp. 481- 506). The University of Michigan Press, p. 482.

<sup>179</sup> For an Abkhaz perspective on the question, see Lakoba, S. (1995). “Abkhazia is Abkhazia,” *Central Asian Survey*, 14: 1, pp. 97-105.

The first significant number of Kartvelians<sup>180</sup> had begun to move to Abkhazia in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the Tsarist Russian expulsion of Muslim Abkhazians into the Ottoman Empire, reducing the ethnic homogeneity in the province.<sup>181</sup> During the Soviet period, as a result of the voluntary settlement policies imposed by Tbilisi and Moscow, Abkhazia was faced with new-comers, predominantly Mingrelians from Western Georgia, radically altering the demographics in Abkhazia. In the 1989 census<sup>182</sup> Georgians constituted approximately 45.7 % of the whole population, whereas Abkhazians constituted only 17.8%.<sup>183</sup> The sudden increase in growth rate of Georgian population boosted Abkhazian fears over the process of ‘Georgianization of Georgia’, as Abkhazians were concerned over their demographic and cultural decline. In addition, the sensitivity of the issue was partly due to the fear of a possible implementation of increased representation of ethnic Georgians in regional administrations based on their powerful ‘ethno-demographical’ status. This would specifically mean for Abkhazians to lose their excessive privileges provided by being the ‘titular nationality’, and hand in the power to ethnic Georgians. In other words, turning into a minority in Abkhazia after 70 years of Tbilisi’s rule reawakened the fears of Abkhazians to lose the claims to power over their territory.

In short, the developments over the last 150 years with the Tsarist Russian expulsions, followed by the extensive Mingrelian settlements, eventually had turned Abkhazians from a

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<sup>180</sup> Kartvelians are a group of people speak Kartvelian (or so-called South Caucasian) languages. This group includes Georgians, Mingrelians, Svans and Laz. Among these groups, Laz live mainly in Turkey. Mingrelians and Svans are not considered minorities, but rather Georgians in Georgia, although they have some linguistic and cultural distinctions from the ethnic Georgians.

<sup>181</sup> By 1923, the percentage of Abkhazians among the whole population in Abkhazia had already fallen to 48 % whereas the percentage of Georgians rising up to 18.4%. See Mueller, D. (1999). “Demography: ethno-demographic history, 1886-1989” in G. Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians*, (pp. 231-237). Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.

<sup>182</sup> It is noteworthy to add that a number of ethnic groups, including Mingrelians and Svans, which are also Kartvelian peoples like Georgians, and Bats people (Bats are known to be related to Chechens and Ingush and they have settled for at least two centuries in the Georgian village of Zemo Alvani) were re-classified as ‘Georgians’ in the censuses after 1926. See Hewitt (1995), p. 52-53. This ‘census policy’ was perfectly in line with the process of ‘Georgianization of Georgia’.

<sup>183</sup> Mueller (1999), p. 237. Also see Henze, P.B. (1991). “The Demography of the Caucasus according to the 1989 Soviet Census Data,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 10, No. 1-2, pp. 147-170.

‘natural majority’ into an ‘artificial minority.’<sup>184</sup> The Abkhazians viewed the patterns of the population change in their homeland as an outcome of Georgian aspirations to assimilate the Abkhaz identity into the Georgian one. Additionally significant, this perception has eventually resulted in Abkhazian resistance towards the return of Georgian IDPs, fearing that returning to the pre-war demographic balance will undermine their numerical power, as well as their claims to authority, which they achieved through the 1993 military victory.<sup>185</sup>

#### **4.5 Perceptions, Sentiments, Memories and Identities**

A careful observer can easily realize that the existing ethnic cleavages in these regions, as well as feelings of fear and historical injustice have been cultivated mainly by the past memories and constructed perceptions. The irreconcilable demands and goals of these communities have pushed them to create ‘self-other’ images, in which the ‘other’ has been portrayed as the ultimate enemy, eventually harboring ethnic boundaries by clear-cut identity markers. In this vein, grievances have been enshrined and the feelings of uncertainty have been materialized, generating perceived insecurities on the part of the allegedly vulnerable groups.

Competing for the state apparatus and full control over the regions in order to safeguard their interests in the absence of high level of trust and credibility, the rival groups have tended to create ‘collective memories’ and ethnic myths constructed in opposition to ‘others’, provoked by the perception of injustice and fear of domination. Besides, it can be added that ‘collective fears of the future’ have perpetuated the conflicts, since groups feared for their physical safety and survival when faced with social uncertainty.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Allworth, E., Bohr, A., Law, V., Smith, G. & Wilson, A. (1998). *Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities*, Cambridge University Press, p. 56.

<sup>185</sup> See Coppieters (2001)

<sup>186</sup> Lake, D. A. & Rothchild, D. (1998). “Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict”, in D. A. Lake and D. Rothchild (ed.), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, (pp. 1-10). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 4.

In the Georgian perception of the Soviet past, the ethnic Georgian inhabitants of the autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were subject to constant discrimination due to the over-representation of the titular nationalities in the political and economic spheres. These Georgians eventually felt the fear of injustice and domination, perceiving the policies of the local leaders severely unjust. Furthermore, Georgians manifested their belief that Abkhazians and South Ossetians had turned out to be puppets of Moscow to thwart the Georgian aspirations to nationhood, creating a sense of distrust towards Abkhazians and Ossetians. On the other hand, Abkhazians and Ossetians had also developed a sense of injustice following the Georgianization policies fed by the exclusive Georgian nationalism. As they felt their very existence was threatened, they mobilized on behalf of their own communities, showing their resentments against the perceived ethnic prejudice and imposing Georgian attitude. Hence, the fear of assimilation motivated them to seek independence from Georgia and secure their survival in their own state-lets.

Particularly significant, the constructed ‘them-us’ illustration in these regions has further intensified the rivalry between the opposing communities since the nation state-building processes, such as glorifying the language and refashioning the national holidays and homeland myths, has tended to mirror images of each other. In this light, history-writing in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have played a vital role in shaping national identities in opposition to the Georgian ‘enemy’ figure whereas Georgian history-writing attempted to discredit Abkhaz and Ossetian arguments, arousing resentments and hostility.<sup>187</sup>

In addition to internalizing prejudiced beliefs and opposing attitudes towards each other over the course of the Soviet period, the hostile activities carried out by the opposing parties, as well as the fighting of the last two decades, have accumulated increasing amounts

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<sup>187</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the history writing versions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia see the article Allworth et al. (1998), p. 53-66. Besides, for further information on the significance of the tools of language and myths in national identity formation, see the same article pages from 167 to 196.

of hatred and mistrust among members of the rival communities.<sup>188</sup> Indeed, as the violence caused irreparable damage to the societies and generated new grievances, it dramatically transformed the conflicts into another phase. That is to say, the difficulties to reach a mutually acceptable solution increased and the on-going confrontation tended towards prolongation.

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<sup>188</sup> Bar-Tal (2003), p. 79-84



## **5. Short-Term Conflict Prolonging Factors**

### **5.1 Internal Dynamics**

#### **5.1.1 The Role of Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

##### **a. Introducing the Dynamics in Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

As fore mentioned, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been two separatist regimes, *de facto* outside the control of Georgia, but *de jure* remained under the Georgian territory by the international community. Holding ‘internal sovereignty’, they have achieved to establish ‘mini state-like’ regimes with their own education systems, health services, domestic economies, commercial relations, military forces, etc.<sup>189</sup> Yet, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been isolated in their foreign relations, because they lack ‘external sovereignty’. In other words, their foreign contacts have been very limited, since they have not been considered to be ‘legitimate’ in the international arena. Besides, they have had embryonic state structures, weak economies and impoverished societies. Still, partly due to Russia’s strong backing and partly due to the internal forces driving their survival, their continued-existence has lasted for over a decade and a half. To be able to understand how the dynamics in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have played a role in hindering the conflict resolution, one should simultaneously evaluate why their *de facto* statuses could be sustained.

To begin with, the *de facto* leaderships of these breakaway enclaves have achieved to endow with almost full control and authority over their local populations, enjoying great power and legitimacy. They have consistently used the basic tools of nationalism to extend their authority and popular support and to justify their demands for maintaining their *de facto* governance. The separatist leaders in these regions have not been willing to concede power by succumbing to any possible arrangement with Georgia, especially given the fact that they have not perceived their Georgian counterparts in the negotiation table as credible and

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<sup>189</sup> King (July 2001), p. 525.

trustworthy. Eventually, Abkhazian and South Osseian leaderships have taken a ‘radical’ attitude, in other words they have become more demanding and less compromising, which has discouraged the achievement of a mutually acceptable political solution.

Not only the authorities, but also the populations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been eager to accept any resolution that would ratify their secession from Georgia. Due to the perceived lack of trust and confidence towards Georgians combined with fear and insecurity heavily incorporated in their mental thinking, they have felt safe and sound only through the maintenance of their current way of life as the peoples under the jurisdiction of their *de facto* regimes. There can be little doubt that these peoples have been afraid to face renewed oppression by the Georgian state and to lose their ‘privileged’ citizenship statuses and national identities, a fear that has been mainly shaped by historical grievances. Besides, the fact that these secessionist regions have enjoyed being on the ‘winning’ side of the armed struggles with Georgia has further fueled their determination to revert from granting any concessions regarding their sovereignties in the on-going negotiations.

A number of political analysts have tended to label the *de facto* states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as ‘fragile’ and ‘failing’ due to the fact that they have been isolated in foreign relations and weak in their economic and political structures. However, the fact remains that they could maintain their existence longer than expected, owing this partly to the militarization of their societies and to the emergence of organized crime, notably illegal trade and smuggling, as well as Russian support for their subsistence. The dynamic forces integrated within their internal structures have pushed them to overcome the social and economic difficulties they have faced with, and rather to sustain their survival at any cost.

#### **b. The Rigidity of the Political Leaderships**

Being one of the most fundamental and necessary attributes of statehood, the organized political leaderships have been integral in the Abkhazian and South Ossetian *de*

*facto* structures. These political leaderships, as in Scott Pegg's words have "*come to power through some degree of indigenous capacity*", receiving popular support and have had the ability "*to provide governmental services to a given population in a specific territory maintaining effective control for a specific time period.*"<sup>190</sup> In this respect, Abkhazian and South Ossetian leaders have been enjoying their 'privileged' positions by firmly holding on to their power, authority and legitimacy over the regions. In the absence of external legitimacy, they have achieved to amass high-level of popular support and ultimately to sustain effective governance and control over the existing resources. For instance, both Abkhazian Sergei Bagapsh and South Ossetian Eduard Kokoity were elected for presidency in their regions, respectively in 2005 and 2006 with more than 90 percent of the votes.

In spite of the accusations for their 'authoritarian' stances and non-democratic acts, it is beyond doubt that the leaders in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have got the sufficient internal support from their populations. A partial explanation for this might be that the leaders in these separatist regions have successfully used the tools of 'nationalism', in particular propaganda and identity-building, to build up local support and ultimately attract the loyalty of their inhabitants. According to Kolsto, "*nation-hood and national identity are not inherent qualities of a state's population, but are developed and sustained through nation-building.*"<sup>191</sup> In a similar fashion, Abkhazian and South Ossetian identities have been consolidated through the cultivation of national symbols such as national anthem, flag, emblem and national holidays; history-writing; promotion of national customs and traditions; propaganda and creation of the 'common foe', notably the perceived image of the 'Georgian enemy'. Eventually, a sense of 'common past', 'common identity' and 'common destiny' has been constructed to unify their local populations under the name of a national struggle against Georgians. Equally important, in both cases 'ethnicity' has been a key factor not only to foster

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<sup>190</sup> Lynch, D. (Oct. 2002). cited from Pegg, Scott (1998). *International Society and the De-facto State*, Aldershot, Brookfield, USA: Ashgate. p. 26.

<sup>191</sup> Kolsto (2006), p. 730

the distinction with Georgians, but to justify the separatism from Georgia. Waller and Malashenko rightly points out that in former Soviet autonomous regions, as well as in former Soviet republics, the ethnic factor “*did not diminish in its salience with the acquisition of independence, but it changed character. From being the basis for mobilization in a struggle for a national liberation, ethnicity was in many cases invoked to legitimate a new order.*”<sup>192</sup> Having gathered popular support and exerted control and authority, Abkhazian and South Ossetian leaderships have been unwilling to grant concessions or negotiate over the sovereignty they have henceforth enjoyed.

Moreover, Abkhazian and South Ossetian leaders have consistently drawn attention to the fact that their regions have already accomplished their ‘statehood’ with only ‘recognition’ being deficient. The idea of ‘being a separate state’ was institutionalized in reality by the establishment of the basic attributes of statehood, such as governmental services, parliaments, political parties, municipalities and education systems. Insisting on being an ‘independent state’ they have taken an inflexible stance during the peace talks. The concept of ‘statehood’ has been particularly significant in Abkhazian rhetoric, since they have used their “*historical tradition of statehood*”<sup>193</sup> to legitimize their claims over jurisdiction in their territory. In this vein, Abkhazians have repeatedly pointed out that they have experienced a long narration of statehood since the foundation of the independent Abkhazian Kingdom in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>194</sup>

In due course, the leaderships in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have taken a non-conformist attitude with adherence to more radical views, since they have never been willing to give up from their local level of power and authority. Although initially Abkhazians and

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<sup>192</sup> Malashenko, A. & Waller, M. (1998), “Conclusions: Conflicts of Loyalty in the Soviet Union and its Successor States,” in B. Coopeters, A. Malashenko & M. Waller (ed.), *Conflicting Loyalties and the State in post-Soviet Russia and Eurasia*, (pp. 225-243). London: Frank Cass Publishers, p. 239.

<sup>193</sup> See Lynch (2001) and Lynch, D. (2000a). “Euro-Asian Conflicts and Peacekeeping Dilemmas”, in Y. Kalyuzhnova & D.Lynch (ed.), *The Euro-Asian World: A Period of Transition*, (pp. 3-27). The Centre for Euro-Asian Studies: Macmillan Press Ltd,

<sup>194</sup> Lakoba (1995)

South Ossetians were ready to discuss a possible arrangement of con-federal ties with Georgia or –in the case of South Ossetia- ‘a very broad autonomy’, their demands shifted towards extremism as the course of the conflicts progressed. Presently, they refuse to be a part within Georgia, demanding recognition for their ‘independent statehood’ and at a minimal scale they might consider re-unifying with Russia. As Dov Lynch states the persistence of separatist leaders on absolute sovereignty has two implications: (i) the peace proposals based on federal power-sharing arrangements are unlikely to be successful and (ii) the *de facto* states will not allow the return of Georgian IDPs who fled during the wars.<sup>195</sup> For Abkhazia and South Ossetia sovereignty has been ‘non-negotiable’ and principally Abkhazians reject the peace proposals that include the all-once return of Georgian IDPs, fueled by the fear that they might once more turn into a ‘minority’ within their homeland.<sup>196</sup>

Although the leaders in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been aware that the peace talks are heading towards a dead end, they have still been eager to participate in negotiations as party to the conflicts in order to increase the level of contact with the international organizations and member states. In other words, the fact that they have been treated as equal partners with Georgia on the negotiation table has strengthened the hands of the separatist leaders, gradually attributing them with some sort of ‘external legitimacy’. Consequently, the *de facto* authorities have not only sustained their power at the national level, but also have reflected it at the international in order to communicate and solidify their absolute control within their regions. Looking at the complete picture, one might claim that the uncompromising stance and radical attitude of the separatist leaders have made the conflict resolution increasingly difficult. Benefiting from the existing conditions and ultimately

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<sup>195</sup> Lynch (2001)

<sup>196</sup> Among the UN’S peace proposals offering a federative arrangement for the conflicts, the most significant was the Boden Document in 2001, yet it failed to get the support of neither Abkhazian nor South Ossetian side, partly because it failed to resolve the distribution of power between the separatist centers and Tbilisi. See Coppieters, (Summer 2001) and Khutsishvili (2006), p. 286.

enjoying authority and legitimacy, these leaderships have remained one of the key factors behind the lack of progress towards conflict resolution.

### **c. Lack of Trust and Credibility; the Source of Fear and Insecurity**

To be able to understand why Abkhazians and South Ossetians have been refusing to accept a political solution that would place them under Georgian jurisdiction, one should comprehend the initial reasons behind their demands for ‘secession’. Faced with the oppression of the Georgian dominant group in 1980s, they perceived separatism as the only way to guarantee their security. The source of fear and insecurity, based on historical hostility, has transcended to contemporary times, as an internal dynamic that enforces the insistence of these breakaway regions on their demands for ‘self-determination’. In addition, the lack of trust deeply-rooted in their perceptions against Georgians has acted as a stimulus to hold on the power and sovereignty which they acquired ‘in the battlefield’ rather than in the political arena. Despite the intense efforts of the international community to mitigate the level of ‘insecurity’, the fact that Abkhazians and South Ossetians view Georgians as dishonest negotiation partners, sustains the perceptual barrier hindering an encouraging atmosphere in the peace talks.

Due to the constant perception of the Georgian threat, the local inhabitants of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have only felt themselves secure since they achieved self-rule over their territories. Accordingly, they have long believed that they would ensure their security if they maintain their independence or if they merge with Russia. Hence, the idea of being a part of Georgia has never been appealing for these breakaway regions. Abkhazians and South Ossetians have little faith in Georgians who have held them responsible “*for their woes in the disputed regions.*”<sup>197</sup> Indeed, the feeling of distrust towards Georgians has been inherited from the past, but has mainly been shaped within the present since long years of military

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<sup>197</sup> See Hewitt, G. (June 2008). “Why Independence for Abkhazia is the Best Solution,” *EurAsia Critic*, pp. 21-25.

threats and economic blockades have elevated the intensity of fear and insecurity. Whereas Georgian authorities have acclaimed South Ossetians and Abkhazians to be the puppets of Russia, they have blamed Georgian governors to violate the ceasefires, as well as the subsequent bilateral and multilateral agreements. Besides, Ossetians and Abkhazians have held the belief that Georgia has subsidized paramilitary groups, hampered the humanitarian assistance and made plans in order to militarily annex the regions.

Although Georgians have expressed their commitment to resolve the conflict peacefully through negotiations and to protect the rights of the peoples in these separatist regions if a federal-power sharing is achieved, South Ossetians and Abkhazians believe that Georgians will act contrary to their promises. Moreover, Abkhazians and South Ossetians have little faith in the future implementation of civic policies involving tolerance towards their distinct identities. However the feeling of distrust is not confined to Abkhazia and South Ossetia but is indeed shared by Georgia as both adversary parties do not perceive each other as credible partners in the negotiations.

Additionally significant, 'triumph' on the battlefields has forged an integral basis for their determination to attain supremacy over their territories. Being on the victorious side has imprinted a fundamental intolerance regarding any attempted interference in their internal affairs. To be more specific, Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities have gained an upper hand in the peace negotiations with Georgia, because their legitimacies have been partly drawn from the victories in the early 1990s. At the same time, however, they have been conscious of the fact that their victories would not be sufficient to infinitely guarantee their securities. Thus, they committed themselves to provide massive resources for military expenditure and the fortification of their defensive lines. As Dov Lynch stated, "*behind all the*

*rhetoric of sovereignty, self-determination and justice, there are calculations of power that have led the separatist authorities to security based on force alone.*"<sup>198</sup>

#### **d. Militarization of the Regions**

Years of isolation under unrecognized authorities have left Abkhazia and South Ossetia not only as weak functioning states with radical leaderships and constant atmosphere of insecurity, but also as highly militarized regions with societies susceptible to crime. Despite considerable efforts by the international community, the regions have not been fully secured and stabilized. As the conflicts remained volatile and the insecurity entrenched as an integral form of social life, militarization in these territories has developed in a profound way, ultimately shaping their political landscape. There can be little doubt that the military victories of early 1990s have contributed to the belief that strong armament along the self-defense lines has been essential to protect the fragile statehood and independence. The perception of a Georgian military intimidation has also been prominent for these separatist regions to hold on military power as an explicit guarantor of security.

Equally important, the *de facto* state status attributed to Abkhazia and South Ossetia created immense opportunities in which illegal paramilitary organizations could flourish. It has reduced the capacity of the separatist authorities to effectively govern their territories and ultimately facilitated the conditions for illegal armed formations, as well as organized crime. Besides, benefiting from their international isolation, South Ossetian and Abkhazian authorities and civilians have promoted strong and harsh militarization as a source of security, opening the entire region to the forces of anarchy and generating a criminal infrastructure. Subsequently the weakness in the social and political structure combined with the 'undefined status' can ultimately explain why militarization in these breakaway state-lets has been

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<sup>198</sup> Lynch (2001)



principally deep rooted and how this has created a negative environment in the conflict resolution process.

To begin with, Charles King states that “*the products of the wars of the Soviet succession are not frozen conflicts, but are rather relatively successful examples of making states by making war.*”<sup>199</sup> Correspondingly, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have established their statehoods and solidified their sovereignties through military means, particularly by the armed conflicts in the early 1990s. Moreover, as Dov Lynch asserts, “*historically, these peoples have rarely, if ever, won wars. Victory has left the de facto states bewildered.*”<sup>200</sup> Since a military victory has been viewed as the fundamental platform for their escape from the oppression of the dominant foreign rule, they tended to perpetuate their survival through military means.<sup>201</sup> Furthermore, the armed forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia “*have combat experience and victories have boosted morale*”<sup>202</sup> which in turn has increased their potency in defending their homelands. Hence, they have provided enormous resources for their military defense, leading to the high militarization of their societies.

Additionally significant has been the constantly perceived threat of an impulsive Georgian military assault. Since the prospects for reintegrating Abkhazia and South Ossetia through peaceful means have been perceived almost impossible, there has remained a widespread belief that Georgia might seek the military option in order to restore authority over the regions. Thus, the build of Georgian military strength, preceded by US’s efforts to establish a well-equipped Georgian army, and Tbilisi’s increasingly threatening rhetoric toward the *de facto* authorities have elevated the fears in Abkhazia and South Ossetia over the last decade. Consequently, in their strategic thinking, military power has remained as the best measure to dissuade Georgia from attempting to resolve the conflicts by coercive means.

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<sup>199</sup> King (July 2001), p. 525

<sup>200</sup> Lynch (2001)

<sup>201</sup> Kolsto (2006), p. 731-732

<sup>202</sup> Herzing (1999), p. 56.

Moreover, in the regions where the rule of law and good governance have been scarce, it should not be so surprising to witness the dramatic increase of separatist armed formations as well as illegal guerilla organizations. As briefly mentioned above, the long-lasting ‘war-like’ situation and Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s emerging ‘undefined’ statuses have provided militarized groups in these regions with favorable circumstances to develop into an enormous scale, rendering borders transparent and creating a general atmosphere of chaos. Faced with poorly developed state institutions and with the turbulent and chaotic security environment, the separatist authorities in the regions have been unable to provide order and guarantee the well-being of its citizens. The virtual collapse of state control, in other words the dis-attachment from central governing authorities, accompanied by the absence of the rule of law and the lack of international legitimacy, have encouraged portions of the populations to ensure their securities and maintain their subsistence through military means.

#### **e. Illegal Trade and Smuggling**

Since the early 1990s, illegal trade and smuggling have become common features in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, destabilizing the entire Caucasus and hindering the peace process. In particular, the on-going skirmishes, lost infrastructure, high militarization and constant mood of insecurity that plagued the regions generated conditions for the development of shadow businesses and the criminalization of economic activities, leading these regions to turn into a safe haven for illicit traffickers and organized crime groups. Furthermore, the regions’ weak economies rendered organized crime a viable alternate employment opportunity and the transparency of national borders facilitated smuggling as the main source of income for the population. Ultimately becoming a serious source of revenue, illegal trade has not only contributed to the survival of these two entities, but also to the impediment of conflict resolution as the persistence of impasse in the context of the conflicts

proved to be advantageous for a variety of groups, not necessarily only for Abkhazians and Ossetians.

It is widely known that chaotic conditions create an ideal environment for the development of organized crime since “*illegal activities easily go unchecked*”.<sup>203</sup> In the cases of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the lack of recognition by the international community has stripped the legitimacy from their governments and consequently the power to effectively govern the region. Equally important, the devastation of the continuous wars and high militarization of society have disrupted the state and civil structures ultimately creating a legal limbo favorable to illegal enterprises. Longstanding disruption of order and law and the ensuing power vacuum facilitated easy access to illegal business ventures. As Walter A. Kemp rightly points out, “*the absence of democratic government and the rule of law, combined with the ability of an authority to protect its security interest and maintain control over a particular territory fosters an environment which the regime can dictate its terms and control the means of subsistence*”.<sup>204</sup>

One might claim that the attitude of the international community and particularly of Georgia contributed to the establishment of fragile institutions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia within which organized crime was allowed to flourish. First of all, although these *de facto* states have enjoyed substantial ‘internal sovereignty’, standing for authority over their territories, they have lacked external sovereignty that “*stands to reason that their form of government will be considered illegitimate and their sources of revenue illegal*.”<sup>205</sup> This is simply because according to international law norms, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are still considered to be within Georgia’s internationally recognized borders. Since, Georgia does not recognize the ‘internal borders’ between itself and the separatist regions as ‘*a legitimate frontier*’, it refuses “*to post border guards or impose any normal controls at the*

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<sup>203</sup> Kolsto (2006), p. 729

<sup>204</sup> Kemp, W. A. (2004). “The Business of Ethnic Conflict,” *Security Dialogue*, 35:1, pp. 47.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

*administrative line.*<sup>206</sup> Failing to enforce authority over the regions and to provide effective border and customs control on the line dividing itself from the *de facto* states, Georgia has contributed to these peripheries to operate as a transit zone in which illegal items are smuggled without any production taxes or tariffs imposition. Besides, since no economic activity in these *de facto* states is considered to be legal by the international community, the separatist authorities grasped the opportunity to provide excessive benefits through such illegal activities.

Moreover, although the unrecognized regimes of South Ossetia and Abkhazia established the institutions essential for statehood, they were unable to construct them efficiently. The weakness of the state apparatus rendered these territories particularly vulnerable to organized crime infiltration and turned illegal trade and smuggling into dominant ways of life, enhancing the “*demoralization of the whole society since the very line between legal and illegal becomes dangerously blurred and fluid*”<sup>207</sup> As the unrecognized regimes failed to provide basic administrative and social services; the transfer of drugs, arms and goods became considerably integral to the regions’ economies rapidly becoming a source of livelihood for its inhabitants.

Additionally significant, in these regions, separatist armed groups encouraged by their authorities have formed networks of criminal activities and have militarized the regions, carrying these acts in the name of a national struggle.<sup>208</sup> This has not only given them a certain level of legitimacy for their illegal exploitation, but also further fueled nationalism among their populations. In other words, battle for state sovereignty pushed Abkhazians and Ossetians to engage in illegal activities in order to finance their armed conflicts while

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<sup>206</sup> Bronner, M. (2008, 16 August). “When the War Ends, Start to Worry, New York Times. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/16/opinion/16bronner.html?ref=opinion>

<sup>207</sup> See Giatzidis, E. (Sep. 2007). “The Challenge of Organized Crime in the Balkans and Political and Economic Implications,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 23:3.

<sup>208</sup> Kemp (2004), p. 52

cementing a cultural and ethnic bondage between their populations desecrating notions of legitimacy and lawful behaviour.

Particularly, South Ossetia is a landlocked province with no viable industrial infrastructure and with an economy buoyed with smuggling between Georgia and Russia. During the Soviet period, the region's functioning industries, such as lead, zinc, wood products, enamel fittings and beer had been integral to the economy of Georgian SSR.<sup>209</sup> However, the continuous wars and out-flow of almost half of the population paralyzed the industrial enterprises leaving South Ossetia increasingly vulnerable to illegal activities. In the last decades, benefiting from its geographical position and controlling the significant Vladikavkaz corridor, it began to serve as a conduit for illegal trade of a variety of contraband, from alcohol to cigarettes, gasoline, drugs, weapons and people.<sup>210</sup> The significance of smuggling for the economy of South Ossetia is further emphasized when Georgia in the summer of 2004 attempted to close the illegal Ergneti market in Tskhinvali, a violent conflict ensued.<sup>211</sup> Located at the entrance to Tskhinvali, Ergneti market had been for years a significant source of income for the region's residents in which ethnic Georgians and Ossetians traded together.<sup>212</sup> The sensitivity of the issue is displayed by the willingness of Ossetians to fight and armed struggle rather than forfeiting their only source of livelihood

On the other side, Abkhazia has more potential sources of income than South Ossetia, such as tourism, substantial hazelnut and tangerine production, trade in scrap metal, as well as power lines. These sources in the region have become even more lucrative since no tax on them has been paid to the Georgian government. In addition to these, Sukhum(i) became a

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<sup>209</sup> King (July 2001), p. 527

<sup>210</sup> Bronner (2008, 16 August)

<sup>211</sup> See Beridze, M. (July 2004), "Title: A Frozen Conflict Turns Warm," *Transitions Online*. Retrieved from EBSCHOhost Database.

<sup>212</sup> Khutsishvili (2006), p. 296

significant transit point for smuggling between Russia and Georgia, especially for the trade of gasoline, arms and hazelnut, allegedly under the protection of Russian troops.<sup>213</sup>

The expansion of organized crime in the regions has benefited not only ethnic Abkhazians and Ossetians, but also a variety of groups such as Georgian officials, Russian peacekeepers, ethnic Georgians and other minorities living in the peripheries of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In Abkhazia, as Dov Lynch argues the illegal operations are carried out through coordination and cooperation of Abkhaz, Armenian and Georgian militia, partisan and criminal groups and Russian peacekeepers, blurring “*the lines between ethnic groups in the conflict, uniting them all in the search for profit.*”<sup>214</sup> The Abkhazian illegal market has also been the main source of revenue for Georgians who recently returned to Gali district of Abkhazia. Similarly, the Ergneti market in South Ossetia has been a ‘life-blood’ not only for Ossetians, but also ethnic Georgians living in South Ossetia.<sup>215</sup>

In particular, neither Georgian authorities nor the Russian peacekeepers have seemed to interested in controlling the smuggling, but rather allegedly they have been benefiting from the criminal networks stretching from Georgia to Russian borders. Aleko Kupatadze of Tbilisi's Transnational Crime and Corruption Center claims that Russian peacekeepers have been “*either receiving illegal shares from smuggling operations or directly implementing contraband trade.*”<sup>216</sup> On the other hand, illegal trade also has benefited some Georgian authorities and central police elites, opening them a window of opportunity to collect customs and tax revenues in the ‘internal borders’ which directly go into their pockets.<sup>217</sup>

Recognizing that international recognition seems unlikely in the near future, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have focused on preserving their *de facto* statuses. Thus, over the course of

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<sup>213</sup> “The hazards of a long, hard freeze,” (2004, 21 August). *Economist*, vol: 372, issue: 8389, pp. 41-42. Retrieved from EBSCOhost Database.

<sup>214</sup> Lynch (2001)

<sup>215</sup> van der Schriek, D. (Sep. 2003). “Made in Russia, Smuggled in South Ossetia,” *Transitions Online*, Retrieved from EBSCOhost Database

<sup>216</sup> See Bronner (2008, 16 August) and van der Schriek, D. (June 2004), “Guns and Roses,” *Transitions Online*. Retrieved from EBSCOhost Database.

<sup>217</sup> King (July 2001), p. 546-547

time “*a perverted and weak, but workable, incentive structure has emerged*” sustaining their subsistence.<sup>218</sup> In this vein, illegal trade and smuggling have been essential for these regions, flourishing as the most prominent economic activities in the absence of a *de jure* standing in international economic relations. Over the course of time, in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the state of suspended conflict has proven to be beneficial for several parties. This has ultimately rendered the preservation of the the frozen peace process increasingly desirable from a number of perspectives. On the other hand though, the devastating impact on the Georgian economy due to the considerable loss from tariffs and taxes should not be undermined. However, an attempt to tackle smuggling in South Ossetia in 2004 by Saakashvili’s government, illustrated that cutting off the ‘life-blood’ without providing any alternatives is definitely not a viable option.

In short, it is argued that the struggle to secure independence and the resulting power vacuum have laid the groundwork for the massive increase in organized crime activity in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Benefiting from the lack of regulations and of ill-structured institutions, both regions have been a channel for smuggled goods, drugs and weapons to and from Russia and Georgia, posing a serious security threat to the whole Caucasus region. Highly isolated in the sphere of international relations, there was no other choice for these unrecognized separatist states but to pursue illegal activities in order to sustain their subsistence. Eventually, Abkhazian and Ossetian politicians have become obliged to support illegal activities as they have comprised the economic infrastructure of their regions. It is further argued that since many alternate groups either inside or outside of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been gaining considerable benefits from illegal economic activities, prolonging the conflicts has ultimately outweighed the benefits of conflict resolutions

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<sup>218</sup> Lynch (2001)

### **5.1.2 The Role of Georgia**

#### **a. Introducing Georgia's Role**

Since 1980s, Georgian state policies have largely contributed to the ethnic conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, strengthening their national aspirations towards separatism. To refresh, the existing Abkhazian and South Ossetian grievances with Georgia have mostly their roots in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Georgian policies towards these autonomous titular nationalities began to become increasingly threatening, creating a tense relationship between ethnic Georgians and non-Georgians in the regions. The fact that Tbilisi opted for single language and single culture policies has played a vital role in fostering ethnic disturbances in these two former Soviet autonomous regions, materializing the fears aroused by the perception of discrimination. The heavy-handed Georgian policies in the late Soviet era, such as attempts to reduce the already existent autonomies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, raised the anxieties about the latent hostility of the majority Georgian population in these societies; ultimately turning inter-ethnic disputes into open warfare. The full-scale wars in early 1990s cemented these breakaway territories' isolation from Georgia, while Georgia could only marginally function in them. The failure of Tbilisi to reinforce its control over the separatist regions for years has further consolidated their existence encouraging their determination for political separatism.

Equally significant, the highly demanding, uncompromising and stubborn attitude of Georgian governments, as well as Georgia's weakness and inability to attract the populations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have cultivated the lack of progress in the conflict resolution process. Besides, the use of consistently threatening policies, such as economic blockades and threats of military invasion; the existence of Georgian IDPs as well of alternative Georgian governments in the breakaway enclaves; have further contributed to the ensuing stalemate in the absence of a final political solution.



## **b. How do Abkhazians and South Ossetians View Georgia?**

Georgia had come on the brink of complete collapse in the early 1990s when two simultaneous ethnic wars and a civil war erupted in the country. Since then, Georgia has been a scene of turmoil, its statehood characterized by immense fragility. Not only Georgia has failed to suppress the secessionist ambitions of its minorities and territorial autonomies, but also has suffered from a number of domestic issues ranging from the economic to the political spheres. Kolsto rightly points out that: “*as long as the parent state is mired in political chaos and economic misery, it is not only prevented from launching a new war to recapture the lost territory but also fails to attract the population of the breakaway region.*”<sup>219</sup> One part of the explanation for Georgia’s inability to convince its separatist regions to reintegrate within a federative arrangement is that it has failed to be appealing for these populations. Aside to its economic and political weakness, Georgia has qualified as ‘fissile state’, which in Paul Jackson’s definition refers to ‘*the state that has a tendency to break apart*’.<sup>220</sup> Faced with a number of internal conflicts, Georgian territorial integrity has always been cumbersome. Indeed, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have not been the only regions threatening Georgian solidarity, but also the districts of Marneuli, Dmenisi, Bolnisi where ethnic Azerbaijanis are located, Pankisi Gorge which thousands of Chechen separatists use as a ‘safe haven’; Adjara in which religious differences and broad autonomy have always created tense relations with Tbilisi and Javakheti where Armenians demand unification with their neighboring homeland have been the other trouble ridden territories, undermining Georgia’s ethnic balance.<sup>221</sup>

The failure to establish and to maintain the state’s territorial integrity continues to remain Georgia’s larger weakness; however Georgia has also suffered from its failing economy, the mafia-style activities of the militia groups, lack of diplomatic potency in the

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<sup>219</sup> Kolsto (2006), p. 732

<sup>220</sup> Jackson (2004), p. 76

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 77. Also see Nodia, G. (2002). “Putting the State Back Together in the Post-Soviet Georgia,” in M. R. Beissinger and C. Young (ed.), *Beyond State Crisis: Post-Colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, pp. 413-443.

international arena and vulnerability to Russian pressure. Besides, due to the long-standing conflicts, not only Georgia has been deprived of access to a large portion of its territory and the significant income from valuable agricultural products and tourism, but also access to the prolific routes towards Russia and to almost half of its Black Sea Coast.<sup>222</sup> Moreover, the communication links with these regions have been paralyzed; the investment in Georgia has been discouraged in addition to the increasing security risks for the oil and gas projects over the country. Failing to construct a well-developed economy and consolidated democracy, Georgia was ultimately unable to attract the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

### **c. Georgian Military Threats and Economic Blockades**

The fact that Georgia has preferred to use military threats and economic blockades to induce the separatist authorities to compromise has deteriorated their relations with Tbilisi, contributing to the lack of confidence and mistrust already rooted in the perceptions of Abkhazian and South Ossetian populations. Partly due to the provocations of the Georgian side and partly due to the ‘constructed’ perceptions in these regions, the inhabitants of these breakaway enclaves have been alarmed against a sudden Georgian military assault. Although Tbilisi has constantly announced its willingness to resolve the conflicts through peaceful means, it has not abandoned the use of the military option, rather employing it as leverage against the separatist demands. The aggressive rhetoric of Georgian officials has irritated the separatist authorities especially given the widespread belief that without a military invasion Georgia would never be able to regain these territories any time soon.<sup>223</sup> The periodical military maneuvering, continuous skirmishes, military threats, the increasing defense expenditures and military build-up have further fed the fears in these societies, fostering their

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<sup>222</sup> Fawn, R. “The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: Perception of its Origins and Prospects for its Resolution”, p. 47. Available (pdf) at [http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/cee/g81/G81\\_chap8/](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/cee/g81/G81_chap8/)

<sup>223</sup> For example see Walker, S. , “South Ossetia: Russian, Georgian...independent?,” Open democracy, 15 November 2006. Available at [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/south\\_ossetia\\_4100.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/south_ossetia_4100.jsp)

vigilance to show resistance against a Georgian attack.<sup>224</sup> In order to justify the possibility of renewed war, Georgia has endeavored to grasp the attention of the international community to the instability in the regions and the operations of the separatist guerrillas. While Georgia has sought international support for its territorial claims, Russia has grasped the opportunity to gain the trust of the local populations in these two tiny lands by providing them security guarantees in case of a Georgian military assault. The Georgian military threats have ultimately pushed the separatist states to rely on the protection of the Russian peacekeeping forces, which have acted as an additional buffer within the conflict zones.

Another military instrument for Tbilisi has been the Georgian paramilitary groups, weakening Georgian contentions that it does not seek to resolve the conflicts by coercive force.<sup>225</sup> The paramilitary troops had especially played a major role in early 1990s when Georgia lacked a disciplined regular army.<sup>226</sup> Although after the mid-1990s the regular Georgian army began to develop, the paramilitary forces continued their guerrilla activities dominantly around Kodori Gorge and Tskhinvali, receiving unofficial support from the Georgian authorities including advanced weaponry and military equipments.<sup>227</sup> The ‘White Legion’ and the ‘Forest Brothers’, which have operated outside the state’s control have further destabilized the region, since skirmishes have sporadically broke out and organized crime has increased substantially.<sup>228</sup> Although the allegations against Georgian officials’ assistance to these guerrilla organizations were not really substantiated with evidence, the fact that they have actually acted as a guard against separatist guerrilla troops and that Tbilisi has not been willing to fully terminate their activities have raised some eyebrows.

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<sup>224</sup> In the summer of 2006, the fact that Georgia was successful in an operation against an Ossetian paramilitary groups, as well as seized a large part of Abkhazia’s Kodori Gorge region have encouraged the supporters of coercive force in Georgia.

<sup>225</sup> Lynch (2001)

<sup>226</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 157

<sup>227</sup> Coppieters (2001), p. 56 and Lynch (2001)

<sup>228</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 174

Moreover, Georgia has for long imposed economic sanctions in Abkhazia basically aiming for two things: first to compel its *de facto* authorities to make concessions in negotiations and second to make sure that it will not flourish in the meantime.<sup>229</sup> Although Georgian officials' expectations were to ease the compromise during the peace talks, economic blockades not only have failed to produce positive effects for the conflict resolution process. Indeed, they have generated negative ones, reducing the possibility for personal contact and confidence-building measures, eroding inter-ethnic trust between the opposing communities and ultimately reinforcing the 'siege mentality'.<sup>230</sup> Besides, economic sanctions could not avoid the existence of the *de facto* Abkhazian state and rather drove it to sustain a "skewed, but workable subsistence".<sup>231</sup> Bearing these in mind, one can suggest that Georgian military and economic policies towards the separatist regions have been ineffective in pressuring for a compromise, but instead have hardened the peace settlement, solidifying the polarization between the adversary parties.

#### **d. The Particular Role of Georgian Leadership**

Since its foundation, the Georgian republic has witnessed the rule of three presidents, namely Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze and Saakashvili. The role of these presidents and their leaderships has been instrumental in the evolution of the nature of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and for the development of a stalemate which has eroded the resolution of these conflicts. In the early independence period, Gamsakhurdia, known with his authoritarian and hard-lined stance, institutionalized the unitary state building policies and exclusive nationalism, deepening the gap between Georgians and minorities and ultimately strengthening the determination of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to seek defection from Georgia. However, the conflicts were further consolidated during Shevardnadze's period,

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<sup>229</sup> Lynch (2002), p. 841 and Herzing (1999), p. 64

<sup>230</sup> Herzing (1999), p. 64-65

<sup>231</sup> Lynch (2001)

materializing in the ensuing deadlock between the opposing parties which up so far has seemed impenetrable to any conflict resolution process.<sup>232</sup>

When Shevardnadze replaced Gamsakhurdia, many believed that he would be influential in encouraging more inclusive policies, solving the problems with the separatist regions and providing the territorial integrity of Georgia with the help of his international reputation and reformist leadership. However, ironically it was during his rule, when the large-scale wars erupted in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Apparently, his ‘domestic weakness’ and his lack of legitimacy had made him susceptible to pressures from nationalist forces within the country, forcing him to adopt a tough line against the separatists.<sup>233</sup> Although he consolidated his power in the mid-1990s, defeating the leaders of the paramilitary groups, he was still not legitimate enough to take big steps towards conflict resolution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He rather pursued a more neutral ‘non-policy’ towards these separatist regions, by trying to ignore the existing conflicts and the peace talks as much as he could not exploit the external forces to shift the conflict resolution process in Georgia’s favor. Thus, he was neither “*willing to grasp the nettle of defeat suffered on the battlefield nor to entertain the possibility of serious compromise with Abkhazia or South Ossetia.*”<sup>234</sup> Though he ruled for twelve years, his fragile position and his lack of courage prevented him from changing the status quo *ante*, which he believed was more preferable than coming face to face with total failure.

After coming to power with the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili had achieved to gain the trust and support of the Georgian electorates. Holding great electoral legitimacy and a broad base of support, he had the means to develop a more active policy towards progress in the peace talks regarding the breakaway territories. Asserting his willingness to end the separatist conflicts and to reunify Georgia, he first sought compromise with the separatist authorities

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<sup>232</sup> Coppieters (2001)

<sup>233</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 148 and Jackson (2004) p. 83

<sup>234</sup> (Art. 73, pg. 20)

through peaceful means, initiating his ‘hearts and minds’ project. Although he was more concerned with Abkhazia due to its strategic location and lucrative resources, he knew that first he had to reintegrate South Ossetia, which was perceived to be an easier target. Thus Georgia’s first move to change the status quo *ante* had come in the summer of 2004 in South Ossetia, which had ended with a great failure. Since then, Georgia has sought new opportunities to shift the dynamics gradually in its favor, having being further encouraged by its economic development, its rising status as an energy hub and the increasing Western involvement. Keeping in line with this aim, Georgia seized the mountainous upper Kodori Gorge in 2006 and installed there the pro-Georgian Abkhaz government-in-exile, as well as supported the alternative *de facto* South Ossetian administration led by Sanakoev.

It is remarkable in retrospect that as Saakashvili failed to reassert Georgian territorial integrity by peaceful means; he turned towards the use of military force, illustrating his eagerness to change the status quo *ante* on whatever grounds. His uncompromising stance combined with his reliance on military power opened up a new phase in Georgia’s relations with the separatist regions, what should be called as the resurgence of aggressiveness and threatening instability. Eventually, the events in the summer of 2008 diminished any credibility for Saakashvili’s efforts to reunify Georgia, as an unsuccessful military campaign crushed the hopes for a peaceful political deal between the two sides.

To sum up, the political leaders in Georgia have developed a form of unitary nationalism which has proven to be unrealistic in a country where only 70 percent of the population has been ethnic Kartvelians.<sup>235</sup> Their tough-lined strategies could neither achieve to diffuse the tensions and resolve the conflicts, nor to shift the status quo in favor of Georgia. Their extreme positions and unwillingness to compromise were responsible, at least in part,

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<sup>235</sup> See the footnote 177.

for the crystallization of the conflicts and the partial development of the dynamics that have been systematically weighing down any possibility for a resolution in the conflicting regions.

**e. Georgia's new method: Alternative Administrations**

As noted before in chapter (3.3.4), since 2006 in South Ossetia, there has been established an 'alternative administration' supported mainly by the ethnic Georgians of the region. The same year, Georgia also moved the Abkhazian government-in-exile from Tbilisi to Upper Kodori Gorge with the aim of increasing its operational activities in and around the Gorge and Gali region. The establishment of parallel governments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia has been perceived as a new Georgian political tool to pressure the separatist regimes, which Georgia never considered to be legitimate. Keeping in line with this policy, Georgia has announced to recognize these alternative governments as the legitimate representatives of the breakaway regions during the peace talks, rather than the separatist authorities. Although the Georgian officials believed that these regimes would contribute to President Saakashvili's project to reintegrate Georgia's secessionist territories, it soon became clear that these efforts were increasingly futile. That is to say, severing the dialogue with the separatist authorities actually rendered viable political solutions redundant.

**f. The Question of IDPs and the Abkhaz Government-in-Exile**

One of the biggest social and economic impacts of the 1992-1993 war in Abkhazia, as well as the war in South Ossetia, was the outflow of thousands of refugees and IDPs that more than halved the overall population in these regions. In respect to the South Ossetian conflict, there have been positive developments over the years. Particularly, since the *de facto* South Ossetian parliament's resolution that allowed the return of ethnic Georgians who were not involved in the 1992 war, there has been reported that a number of ethnic Georgians

spontaneously returned to South Ossetia whereas Ossetians to central Georgia.<sup>236</sup> However, in Abkhazia the question of IDPs has particularly remained significant and controversial, that is, the IDPs that fled from Abkhazia to other parts of Georgia have been a significant impediment for the peace settlement in this region. On the other hand, the non-settlement of the conflict has continued to affect these high numbers of IDPs who have suffered from poor living conditions and difficulties to integrate into the local societies within central Georgia.

The war in Abkhazia in 1992-1993 had resulted in the outflow of almost whole Georgian population from the Abkhaz cities, aside to other populations who fled to Russia or back to their home countries due to the threat of personal violence and stagnating economic conditions. After the war, Abkhazia declared that the Georgian refugees had fled “*as a result of their collaboration with the occupying forces and fear of accusation thereof.*”<sup>237</sup> On the other side, Georgia asserted that it was a part of Abkhazian strategy to cleanse the region from ethnic Georgians.<sup>238</sup> Since then, the IDPs within central Georgia have continued to be a major problem for Georgian leadership, with their demands to return back to their perceived homeland, being one of the key parties to the Abkhazian conflict.

The Abkhazian Government in- exile was established by a number of ethnic Georgian deputies of the former Abkhazian parliament prior to the armed conflict. Created as an alternative to the *de facto* government of the Republic of Abkhazia, this ethnically Georgian structure composed of ministries, state committees and inspectorates.<sup>239</sup> Not only Georgian authorities subsidized this government in exile, but also attributed it seats in the Georgian

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<sup>236</sup> (Jamestown Monitor, vol. 3 No. 217, 19 November 1997.

<sup>237</sup> “Report of a UNPO Coordinated Human Rights Mission to Abkhazia and Georgia”, (Nov/Dec 1992)

<sup>238</sup> Ibid. and UNHCR Reports (1997). “The Dynamics and Challenges of Ethnic Cleansing: The Georgia-Abkhazia Case,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 87-88. UN SC resolutions and UN mission reports had accused Abkhazia and partly Georgia of human rights violations, but they were not very clear about the term ‘ethnic cleansing’. See UN Security Council resolution- S/RES/ 876 (1993), UN SC document S/26795. Besides, the total number of these IDPs from Abkhazia was uncertain as Georgian and the *de facto* Abkhazian officials made different claims. In 1997, the Georgian Ministry for Refugees claimed that there were at least 250 thousand refugees from Abkhazia in Georgia, whereas the Abkhazian authorities claimed the number of IDPs was not more than 150 thousand.

<sup>239</sup> Lynch (2001)



Parliament until Saakasvili's reforms in 2004 terminated this faction in the government.<sup>240</sup> The objective of such a structure was to represent the Abkhazia's ethnic Georgian refugees, providing them an opportunity to voice their demands and to channel their political discontent, ultimately giving an upper hand to Georgian authorities in the peace process. Besides, Tbilisi has never accepted that the *de facto* government of Abkhazia has had any genuine jurisdiction over the Abkhazian territory. Indeed, the Georgian side has believed that such a structure with 'no legitimacy' was crafting a new gap between the Abkhaz population and Georgian refugees.<sup>241</sup>

For Tbilisi, the question of the return of IDPs has retained an important place due to a variety of reasons, as the continued presence of these refugees within Georgia has destabilized the country. First of all, the pensions for around 200,000 IDPs have been a big burden on Georgia, exhausting its economic and financial resources. Even more importantly, the non-resolution of the problem has placed a great strain on Georgian leadership, challenging its legitimacy and authority since Georgian refugees have intensely pressured the Georgian authorities to solve the IDP question. Furthermore, the IDP problem has been highly related with the Abkhazian conflict and ultimately with Georgian claims over territorial solidarity. Thus, conceding from the demands of these ethnic Georgian refugees has been perceived by Georgian authorities as giving up from the right to govern the separatist territories. In short, these IDPs integrating highly into Georgian state-led mechanisms with the ability to pressure the governments and to question the legitimacy of the Georgian leaders by the means of lobbying, have played a great role in the course of the Abkhazian conflict.

In this respect, the radical demands of IDPs and the uncompromising stance of the Abkhaz government-in-exile have been influential in blocking the peace settlement and

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<sup>240</sup> Khutsishvili (2006), p. 295

<sup>241</sup> The incumbent Georgian Foreign Minister, Irakli Menagharishvili's speech in November 1996 in Avebury Lord Eric. (1996). "Elections in Abkhazia and the Prospects for Peace", Report on the Visit to Georgia/Abkhazia 21-28 November 1996 (Presentation to the Parliamentary Human Rights Group of the United Kingdom, December 1996). Retrieved from [http://www.unpo.org/downloads/Abkhazia\\_Georgia\\_report\\_1996.pdf](http://www.unpo.org/downloads/Abkhazia_Georgia_report_1996.pdf).

eventually solidifying the stalemate. Living in compact groups, the IDPs have built up a distinct view of the conflict, making an ultimate compromise increasingly difficult.<sup>242</sup> Channeling the discontent of thousands of IDPs, the Abkhaz government- in-exile has placed stakes in the peace talks, rather than seeking a middle ground for the conflict resolution. The belief prevails that leaders of the Abkhaz government-in-exile have opposed the peace process, fearing that a final political solution will fail to adhere to their demands.<sup>243</sup>

One of Georgia's main goals during the peace talks has been to provide the safe return of Georgian IDPs to Abkhazia. Ethnic Abkhazians, however, have refused to succumb to Georgian demands in fear of turning back to a minority in their perceived homeland, as well the threat of a renewed conflict at the local level. Surprisingly though, in 2000 the *de facto* Abkhaz government unilaterally declared to entitle thousands of these IDPs to return in the Gali district, where Georgians used to be a compact majority before the fighting. Still, Abkhazia has taken a firm stance against large inflows of Georgians and has deported some informal returnees, rejecting the return of the whole IDP population, which would undermine the post-war demographic and ethnic balance of the region. On the other side, '*the gradual staged return*' of refugees has not been objected by the Abkhaz authorities, but rather by Georgian officials. It has been asserted that the Georgian attitude has been such due to its perception of the staged return as an Abkhaz strategy to politically and socially integrate the returned IDPs into the Abkhazian state.<sup>244</sup> Georgia has declared not to accept any conflict resolution process if it excludes the return of the whole IDP population to Abkhazia, whereas Abkhazians have announced their intention to reject any such proposal. Subsequently, despite the long-standing negotiations, the two sides have been unable to agree over the issue of

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<sup>242</sup> Lynch (2001)

<sup>243</sup> In particular, Tamaz Nadareishvili- the Chairman of the Abkhazian government in exile until he was voted down in February 2004- was known with his radical stance and extremely negative rhetoric against Abkhazian separatists See Khutsishvili (2006), p. 295.

<sup>244</sup> See Krylov, A. (2001). "The Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict," in G. Chufrin (ed.) *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, (pp. 281-294). Oxford University Press.

IDPs. As this question remains unresolved, Tbilisi will continue to exploit it as a ‘bargaining chip’ for humanitarian aid and as an additional leverage against Abkhazia in the conflict resolution process.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Larrabee (2004), p. 148

## **5.2 External Dynamics**

### **5.2.1 The Role of Russia**

#### **a. Introducing Russian Role and its Implications over the Separatist Regions**

The Russian foreign and security policy outlook has generally been favoring the preservation of the political and territorial status quo but along with a tendency towards unilateral intervention to neighboring regions. Hence, Russia has played a key role in Transcaucasia's disputes and ethnic conflicts including the ones in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The *de facto* statuses of these two breakaway states and lack of progress towards conflict resolution have lingered the Russian dominant position on the regions, giving Russia a prospect to exert political leverage on Georgia. Since the signing of the ceasefires in South Ossetia and Abkhazia during the 1992-94 period under Russian mediation and the consecutive deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces in the regions, Russia has attempted to fulfill the roles of an arbiter and a policeman. Moreover, maintaining strong military presence in Georgia,<sup>246</sup> Russia has been an integral part of the on-going developments in the breakaway regions.

Russia for long has acted as an 'outside protector' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, functioning as the unrecognized quasi states' only connection with the outside world. Not only have the secessionist states' economies and political considerations heavily depended on its ties to Russia, but also the Russian ruble has circulated as the official currency and Russian has persisted as the main language for inter-ethnic communication in the regions. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of Abkhaz and Ossetian populations have held visa

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<sup>246</sup> Russian military presence in Georgia was not only through the peacekeeping activities, but also through the deployment of troops in the four military bases in Georgia, namely Vaziani (Tbilisi), Gudauta (Abkhazia), Batumi and Akhalkalki, which were inherited from the Soviet Union. By signing the OSCE Istanbul Declaration in November 1999, Russia promised to reduce its military presence in Georgia, complying with the CFE (Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty). Russia withdrew from the bases in Vaziani and Gudauta in 2001, however, prolonged the withdrawal from the two other bases for years, remaining there against the wishes of the Georgian government, until finally withdrew from them in 2007. As Larrabee stated, Russia for years manipulated them as a "*convenient vehicle to pressure the Georgian leadership and as a useful bargaining chip*". (Larabee (2004), p. 148)

privileges, if not Russian citizenship. Given its longstanding special relationship with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia has been eager to retain its grasp over these two regions.

Caring similar weight, the Russian identity and reputation have been shaped to a great extent by its nostalgia for the imperial Soviet past. Similarly, Russia's concern for maintaining its traditional sphere of influence over the former Soviet territories has played a fundamental role in determining its stance towards the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Alarmed with US and European penetration into these conflicts, one of Russia's objectives and priorities has been to keep its control over this strategically significant region. Equally important, Russia has perceived North Caucasia and South Caucasia within the same security complex. Thus, according to the Russian view, the stability of the North Caucasus and Russian territorial integrity heavily depend on the developments in and around Georgia. As Dov Lynch briefly explains, Russian policies in Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts "was based on two principles: i) "to localize the conflict in order to avoid a spill over into the unstable North Caucasus region", ii ) to "not let the vacuum that had emerged in the region be filled by outside forces."<sup>247</sup> Consecutively, Russian attitude has been reflected with its desire to sustain its strong military presence in Georgia and with its willingness to retain its position as the key mediator in the negotiations between the conflicting parties.

On the other side, Georgian political considerations have reflected anxieties over Russia's imposing unilateralism, since Russia's meddling in Georgian affairs with respect to South Ossetia and Abkhazia has imprinted a negative perception among Georgians. According to the official Georgian view, Russia could not remain a neutral and impartial party to the existing conflicts, failing to act as a trustworthy mediator and a responsible international stakeholder. Thus, the Georgian government has repeatedly accused Russia for

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<sup>247</sup> Lynch (2000b), p. 133

backing the ambitions of these separatist regions in order to reinforce its hegemony over Georgia and to undermine Georgia's pro-Western attitude.

There are two different arguments concerning Russia's role in Abkhazian and South Ossetian disputes. One claims that Russia's heavy handed manipulation of the conflicts has been the major reason behind the lack of progress towards the conflict resolution, whereas the other asserts that Russia achieved to preserve the stability in the regions for more than 15 years.<sup>248</sup> Although these two arguments seem totally contradictory at first glance, they are rather complementary. Playing a significant role in the survival of the *de facto* regimes of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia largely contributed in the maintenance of the status quo *ante*. Besides, failing to pressure the conflicting sides to take steps towards a final political solution, Russia was unable to fulfill its task as an efficient mediator, creating an impasse in the conflict resolution process. On the other hand, Russian military presence and its diplomatic weight circumvented the eruption of a large-scale war between the separatist regions and Georgia for more than a decade and a half, furnishing a level of stability in the conflict zones. Yet, the unpredicted 'five-day war' of the last summer guided directly by Russia has illustrated the fragileness of this stability, as well as the ambiguity of Russian strategy. Still, it is remarkable in retrospect that Russia has been traditionally "*a status quo power*" which does not favor change, especially if the newly developed dynamics contradict its interests.<sup>249</sup> In line with this attitude, Russia was keen in entrenching the status quo *ante* and keeping its historical influence over South Caucasus, driving Abkhazia and South Ossetia deeper into its embrace.

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<sup>248</sup> For the latter argument see Hewitt (2008).

<sup>249</sup> See Hill, F. (2003). "Seismic Shifts in Eurasia: the Changing Relationship between Turkey and Russia and its Implications for the South Caucasus," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 1743-9639, vol. 3, issue. 3, pp. 55-75.

## **b. Russian Geopolitical Interests in its Traditional Sphere of Influence**

Russia did not only inherit the Soviet era's glorious past of a multi-ethnic empire, but also a strong sense of supremacy, which guided its tendency to maintain its influence over its former Soviet subjects. Although the Soviet Empire formally dissolved in December 1991, Russia could not transcend the idea that it was no longer the center of today's ex-Soviet territories. During the Soviet rule, there had existed a hierarchical system in which Moscow had a decisive say in the political and economic choices of the Soviet's constituent republics. Moreover, all the central institutions were based in Russia, whereas Russian was the empire's *lingua franca*<sup>250</sup>. Considering its historical ties with the ex-Soviet states, Russia has aimed to remain as the leading figure of their new political and economic realities.

Being a territory both under Russian and the Soviet Empire, Georgia and the surrounding region has been considered by Russia to be an integral part of its traditional sphere of influence. Thus, Moscow has always sought to express a voice in its southern neighbor's foreign policy and economic assessments. Very much in line with this strategic thinking, when the wars erupted in Georgia's autonomous regions in early 1990s, Russia directly intervened and showed its vigilance to pursue the role of a mediator in the established negotiation mechanisms for the resolution of the on-going disputes. In this period, conversely, the Western powers were not yet interested in Georgia, but rather were preoccupied with the post-Cold War arrangements and their implications for Europe. Grasping the opportunity to become the hegemonic power in South Caucasian affairs, Russia has tried to sustain the authoritarian Soviet-era political regime with an increasingly patronizing attitude.

Although accused of siding with the separatists, Russia's initial goal was to keep not only Sukhum(i) and Tskhinvali, but also Tbilisi under its influence, circumventing emerging anti-Russian orientation in Georgia. Hence, Russia 'encouraged' Georgia to be a member of

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<sup>250</sup> See Scott, E. R. (2007, 16 January) "Russia and Georgia After Empire", Russian Analytical Digest, no: 13, pg. 2-5. Retrieved from [www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/](http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/)

the CIS in 1994 in order to keep it under its *de facto* sphere of influence.<sup>251</sup> One might claim that what Russia aimed originally was to manipulate the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order for them “*to fall into line on joint defense of the external borders of the former Soviet Union.*”<sup>252</sup> In other words, Russia did not accept to stay in the periphery of these conflicts, but rather in the center of them. Giving Moscow a degree of leverage, the conflicts strengthened the hands of Russian leadership to sustain its dominance over Georgia and its separatist regions, leading them to remain dependent on Russian backing.

On the other side, the favorable conditions serving to Russia’s long-term security demands could only be maintained if the standstill in the resolution process continued and if the other external powers were eliminated from the scene. Therefore, although Russia has been considered an international player as a member of the UN Security Council and OSCE, its strategy with respect to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has been extremely exclusionary. Circumventing the international community’s direct involvement, Russia has preserved its dominancy over the conflicts as well as the conflict resolution processes. For instance, despite the fact that OSCE and UNOMIG were attributed long-term missions in the conflict zones in early 1990s, their involvement in the conflicts have remained limited, primarily due to Russia’s negative attitude. Besides, until the August War in 2008, Russia allowed neither EU nor US to take a share of responsibility in the region, treating them as security challengers. Additionally, Russia’s reluctance to pressure the separatist regions for a compromise in the negotiations has raised questions whether Russia was promoting the resolution of the conflicts or their continuation.

In addition, a zero-sum approach has always leaned to dictate the Russian foreign-policy outlook within the security complexes of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Thus, Russia has viewed any Western engagement in these regions as naturally

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<sup>251</sup> See Bremmer, I. & Bailes, A. (Jan. 1998). “Sub-Regionalism in the Newly Independent States”, *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1944-), 74:1, pp. 131-147.

<sup>252</sup> Herzing (1999), p. 49



disadvantageous for itself.<sup>253</sup> What has concerned the Russia the most has been the eastward expansion of NATO and the growing interest of the US in Southern Caucasus, which have been inherently incompatible with Russian objectives. As a result, Georgian-West rapprochement, particularly Georgia's admission for NATO membership and Georgia's strategic relationship with the US, has been perceived by Russia as a threat to its national and security interests. Hence, Moscow has constantly sent Western Europe, NATO and the US overt messages that read: "Do not come into my backyard."

Equally significant, Russia has been so concerned about being the hegemonic power in Transcaucasus not only because of the Soviet legacy and its implications on its reputation and identity, but also because of the geo-political competition raging around the region. Energy politics has been the most critical element of this competition between various global and regional powers fascinated with the significant hydrocarbon resources in the Caspian Basin. Russia has been well aware of the potential advantages of this region and the current projects for Eurasian transportation routes and energy pipelines. As one of the primary energy suppliers to the European market, Russia has been very determined to secure its Caspian oil and gas supplies in order to maximize its profits.

### **c. Shifting of Russian Policy in 1990s**

Within the first years following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia had acted more cautious and isolated in the international fora, trying to adapt to the new world order. However, this 'passive' and 'neutral' initial period did not last much long as Russia found itself surrounded by fierce conflicts around the Caucasus including the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since then, for Russia, maintaining the ex-Soviet peripheries under its

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<sup>253</sup> Larrabee, F. S. (2004). "The Russian Factor in Western Strategy toward the Black Sea Region," in R. D. Asmus and B. B. Jackson (ed.), *A New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region*, (pp. 147-156). The German Mashall Fund, Washington D.C, p. 151.

sway, as well as avoiding the destabilization of these two conflicts, has become the main priority leading to the resurfacing of more assertive and coercive policies

Throughout the Abkhazian War of 1992-1993, Russian policy was characterized with incoherencies since Russia attempted to support Abkhazian, as well as Georgian forces. For instance, in the beginning of the war, Russia was sending military equipment to the Georgian side,<sup>254</sup> however after a while began to direct its assistance towards Abkhazia, deteriorating its relations with Georgia. During the second half of 1993, a Russian airborne regiment in Abkhazia was blamed by Georgians for an attack on Georgian troops, as well as for the equipment of Abkhaz forces with Russian weaponry.<sup>255</sup> This pro-Abkhaz intervention was not only backed by certain units in the Russian military and political circles, but also by the North Caucasus people within the Russian Federation. Encouraged by the Russian military, large number of voluntary soldiers from the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus arrived in Abkhazia to fight alongside Abkhaz in September 1993.<sup>256</sup> As Dov Lynch argues, Russia's basic strategy at the time was to induce Georgian government to comply with Russian demands.<sup>257</sup> Keeping in line with its strategy, Russia conditioned Georgia to join the CIS in exchange for its support to Georgian military and for its diplomatic contribution to resolve the Abkhaz conflict. Faced not only with increasing Abkhaz attacks, but also with the Zviadists' upsurge in western Georgia, Shevardnadze believed that Georgia needed the backing of Russia in order to combat against the Zviadists and to provide Georgian territorial integrity.

After Georgia became a member of CIS, Russia's pro-Abkhaz stance transformed into a pro-Georgian one. The shift in Russian position was explained partly due to the emerging Chechen conflict and partly due to Russian desire to turn Georgia a 'puppet' state in South

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<sup>254</sup> Lynch (2000b), p. 133.

<sup>255</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 51-54

<sup>256</sup> Lynch (2000b), p. 137

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 130

Caucasus.<sup>258</sup> In the aftermath of the Kremlin- sponsored Sochi Ceasefire Agreement in July 1993, which foresaw the deployment of Russian-led CIS peacekeeping forces, Russia ceased its support to Abkhazians authorities, closed its border with the *de facto* state and imposed economic sanctions to the region.<sup>259</sup>

In the second half of the 1990s, it became clear that faced with the Chechen disaster, Russian strategy was devoted to strengthen the stability in the conflicts, which could “*quickly envelop the Northern Caucasus and jeopardize the security of the oil pipeline extending from Baku to Novorossiysk via Chechnya and Dagestan.*”<sup>260</sup> On the other side, although the civil war with Zviadists was curbed with Russian assistance, Georgian demands over Abkhazia were never really fulfilled. Russia had neither forced Abkhazia for the return of IDPs nor had assured the territorial integrity of Georgia. Moreover, Abkhazia had continued to receive both military and economic support from Russia, chiefly from the North Caucasian people. Furthermore, Moscow had retained its connection with the Abkhaz armed separatist groups.<sup>261</sup> Subsequently, the Russian ambivalent stance in the 1994-2000 period, sending mixed signals to both Abkhazia and Georgia, had neither comforted Georgian nor the Abkhazian side, since they could no longer guarantee Russia’s backing. However, in line with the changing dynamics of the last decade, Abkhazia, as well as South Ossetia, could achieve to secure substantial Russian support, though still having question marks over Russia’s ‘credibility’.<sup>262</sup> Still, it has been in the interests of these two regions to maintain the strategic

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid. p. 141-142 and Winrow, G. M. (2000). “A New Great Game in the Transcaucasus?” in Y. Kalyuzhnova & D.Lynch (ed.), *The Euro-Asian World: A Period of Transition*, (pp. 45-68). The Centre for Euro-Asian Studies: Macmillan Press Ltd, pg. 52. Also see Zverev (1996), p. 51-54. It is significant to mention that in Russia the significant political circles, such as certain elements of the military, of Ministry of Defense and of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) including the foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev were rejecting the idea of establishing an independent Abkhazia which could encourage separatism in North Caucasus, despite the huge sympathy for Abkhazians in some other Russian circles, such as the State Duma and a number of bureaucrats in MFA and in the Ministry of Interior, as well as the Cossacks. For further information see Lynch (2000b), p. 135 and Winrow (2000), p. 52.

<sup>259</sup> Lynch (2000b), p. 141-142

<sup>260</sup> Winrow (2000), p. 51.

<sup>261</sup> Winrow (2000), p. 49-50.

<sup>262</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 396

deal with Russia and to use Moscow's support to consolidate their statehood. Indeed, in the recent years both Abkhazia and South Ossetia expressed their willingness for the status of a free associated state with Russia, which would grant them international sovereignty.<sup>263</sup>

#### **d. Russian Concerns over Stability in North Caucasus: The Chechen Question and Pankisi Gorge**

Chechnya is a North Caucasian separatist republic within Russia that had remained *de facto* independent between 1996-1999 until Russia intervened by force, re-conquered the region and established a puppet administration.<sup>264</sup> The Chechen conflict in 1990s had highlighted the dangers of the spill-over effect of the separatist tendencies, pushing Russia to be more prudential in its policies concerning Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia believed that the instability in South Caucasus could generate instability in its northern districts; escalating separatist tendencies or favorable conditions for the Chechen militia. Russian analyst Markedonov claims that, also resembling the Russian official rhetoric, "*Russian dominance of the South Caucasus is not a question of its 'imperial resurrection'*", but rather "*securing stability in the former republics of the South Caucasus is a principle condition for the peaceful development of Russia itself and the preservation of the state's integrity.*"<sup>265</sup>

Keeping in line with such a security approach, Russian military strategy in Georgia in the last decade has not only focused on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also on Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. Pankisi Gorge, which lies on the small valley high in the mountains of north-east Georgia, near the Chechnya frontier, is claimed to be a safe haven for Chechen separatist

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<sup>263</sup> Fuller, L. "How does Abkhazia Envisage its Future Relationship with Russia?" *Caucasus Report*, Vol. 4 No. 36 (2001), <http://www.rferl.org/>. In October 2006 Abkhaz leaders renewed their calls for associated relationship with Russia, claiming, in the words of the Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh, "*even if Abkhazia is recognized as an independent state, it will still remain at gunshot distance from Georgia*", and that Russia is "*a guarantor of peace and stability in Abkhazia.*" See "Abkhaz leader calls for Closer, Associate Relationship with Russia", *Eurasia Digest*, 17 October 2006 from [www.eurasia.net.org/resource/georgia/](http://www.eurasia.net.org/resource/georgia/)

<sup>264</sup> Rywkin (2006), p. 24

<sup>265</sup> See Markedonov, S. (2007, 16 January). "Russia Seeks to Promote Peace and Stability in the Caucasus", *Russian Analytical Digest*, no: 13, pp. 11-13. Available at [www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/](http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/)

guerillas and a transit zone for international terrorists.<sup>266</sup> Providing stability in North Caucasus and resolving the Chechen problem seemed only possible if Pankisi Gorge was effectively taken under control. Pankisi Gorge has become a focal point of attention as Russia used it as a mean to put pressure on Georgia and to justify its extensive military existence along its southern frontiers.

The Russian-Georgian tension over Pankisi Gorge was ignited as Russian officials indicated their willingness to crush these separatists while blaming Georgia for failing to suppress terrorist threat along the Georgian-Russian borders.<sup>267</sup> Although Tbilisi initially denied Russian claims, Shevardnadze admitted the existence of Chechen militias in Abkhazia and Pankisi Gorge in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, indicating Georgia's readiness to cooperate with Russia to fight against terrorism.<sup>268</sup> Still, Georgians were preoccupied with Russian efforts to employ the anti-terrorism banner as an excuse to justify its military operations within Georgian frontiers.<sup>269</sup> Georgian-Russian relations further deteriorated following the US's declaration of plans to grant assistance to Georgia in controlling the terrorists activities in Pankisi Gorge.<sup>270</sup> Russians were preoccupied with the increasing of US' influence in Georgia which clashed with its strategic objectives whereas Abkhazians and South Ossetians concerns rose over a renewed Georgian military attack due to its increasing military power.

#### **e. Russia's Historical, Ethnic and Linguistic Links with the Separatist Regions**

Russian Federation has inherited from the Soviet Union and Tsarist Russia a shared history with South Ossetians and Abkhazians in which the bilateral relations had fluctuated throughout the past two centuries. In particular, Abkhaz had an intense and hostile

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<sup>266</sup> Devdariani, J. (2001, 1 October). "Georgia Fears Russia's Anti-terrorism Drive", *Eurasia Insight*,. Available at <http://www.eurasianet.org>

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> "Georgia Yields to Russian Pressure", 26 September, 2001, *Civil Georgia*, from <http://www.civil.ge>.

<sup>269</sup> Devdariani, J. (2001, 19 October). "Putin's Cunning Politics", *Civil Georgia*, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)

<sup>270</sup> Traynor, I. (2002, 22 Feb.). "Russia Angry at US War Plan for Georgia." *Guardian*.

relationship with the Tsarist regime, due to the deportation of more than half of Abkhaz population, predominantly of Muslims to the Ottoman Empire. Abkhazian-Russian rivalry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century transformed into an Abkhaz-Georgian one during the 20<sup>th</sup> century leading Abkhazians to side with Bolshevik Russians in the fight against the Menshevik Georgian Republic. Since then Abkhazians have developed a close affiliation with Russia, but the real rapprochement could only begin in the last decade as Russia took Abkhazians under its protection, considering itself as Abkhazia's 'big brother'. On the other side, by tradition Ossetians have had very close relations with Russians as they have been regarded as 'loyal citizens' both by the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Since the termination of the Soviet rule and the *de facto* secession of South Ossetians from the new Georgian Republic, Russia has always provided them with shelter, safeguarding their interests and demands.

Abkhazians and Ossetians are ethnic groups distinct from both Russians and Georgians, but they feel historically and ethnically affiliated with the North Caucasus peoples which live under the Russian Federation. Particularly, Ossetia, is administratively divided into two as South Ossetians' ethnic counterparts, the North Ossetians, populate the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania which is a federal subject of Russia. Although South Ossetians and North Ossetians are separated not only by the national frontiers, also by the high Caucasus Mountains, they have developed relations "*on the basis of ethnic, national, historical-territorial unity and social-economic integration.*"<sup>271</sup> The fact that North Ossetia, has been a constituent part of the Russian Federation and that North Ossetians have played an efficient role in lobbying Moscow, have ultimately enhanced the close ties between South Ossetians and Russia. Similarly, Abkhazians have enjoyed the political support of Circassians, Cossaks and other North Caucasus peoples, who have substantially pressured Moscow. Abkhazia and

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<sup>271</sup> (From Article 8 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Ossetia from the website [http://www.rrc.ge/law/konst\\_2001\\_04\\_08\\_e.htm?lawid=1504&lng\\_3=en](http://www.rrc.ge/law/konst_2001_04_08_e.htm?lawid=1504&lng_3=en). The data is compiled from Newspaper "Youzhnaia Ossetia", no: 33, 21 April 2001.

South Ossetia's ties with Russia's North Caucasus regions are developed further through increased economic integration and commercial relations.<sup>272</sup>

Additionally, in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Russian language has held an important place. Retaining its status as the main language of interethnic communication in these territories, Russian has been recognized a state language by the constitutions of the two *de facto* states, on the equal ground with the official languages of Abkhazian and Ossetian.<sup>273</sup> The significance of the Russian language in these regions has been further emphasized with the existence of state-funded or private newspapers published in Russian.<sup>274</sup>

#### **f. Russian Support and Involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

Since the wars of the early 1990s, Russia has pursued an engagement policy towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia on political, economic and social levels, as well as providing considerable military backing. In the political sphere, Russia has provided substantial diplomatic support to the separatist regions. Particularly, the State Duma, the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia, has played a prominent role in addressing Abkhazian and Ossetian demands, sending messages to Kremlin to back these *de facto* regimes. Since the mid-1990s, it has issued parliamentary resolutions calling for the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for successful settlement of the conflicts through peaceful means and for the substantial assistance to the peoples of the regions. Although the Duma has not been directly involved in Russian foreign policy decision-making, its activities have been influential in

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<sup>272</sup> Furthermore, the highest concentration of Russians in the region is in Abkhazia, constituting for more than 10 percent of its population, directing Moscow to consider the demands of their co-ethnic population.

<sup>273</sup> The Article 6 of the Constitution of Abkhazia ratified on November 26, 1994 states: "*The official language of the Republic of Abkhazia shall be the Abkhazian language. The Russian language, equally with the Abkhazian language, shall be recognized as a language of State and other institutions.*" From the website: (<http://www.unpo.org/content/view/697/236>). The Article 4 of the Constitution of Abkhazia ratified on 8 April 2001 states: "*The official language of the Republic of South Ossetia is Ossetian language...The Russian language, equally with the Ossetian language, and at the places of compact settlement of Georgians - the Georgian language shall be recognized as a language of State and other institutions*" from the website: [http://www.rrc.ge/law/konst\\_2001\\_04\\_08\\_e.htm?lawid=1504&lng\\_3=en](http://www.rrc.ge/law/konst_2001_04_08_e.htm?lawid=1504&lng_3=en)

<sup>274</sup> For examples; Yuzhnaya Osetia in South Ossetia and Respublika Abkhazia, Ekho Abkhazii, Nuzhnaya Gazeta and Chegemskaya in Abkhazia. The data is retrieved from the websites <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3261059.stm> and [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country\\_profiles/3797729.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/3797729.stm)

determining the course of the lobbying efforts. For instance, the Duma was instrumental in mitigating the level of Russian restrictions on Abkhazia in mid-1990s, voicing concerns about their consequences and emphasizing their illegality.<sup>275</sup> The Duma's position was further toughened following the appeal of Abkhazia on February 2004 to establish an 'associated membership status' for the Republic of Abkhazia within the Russian Federation.<sup>276</sup>

Similarly, in 5 August 2004, parliamentarians of the Duma compiled a statement in favor of South Ossetia, criticizing the Georgian acts that resulted in the outburst of violent skirmishes in the conflict zone. The statement backed North Ossetia's declaration that if Georgia were to attack South Ossetia, they would defend their co-ethnics, the document reading that "*the Russian Federation may be involved in it*" due to "*thousands of Russian citizens residing in the Caucasian region's republics,*" heightening Georgian concerns about Russia's intention to undermine the territorial integrity of Georgia.<sup>277</sup> Following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, the Duma intensified its efforts on March 2008 for the Kremlin "*to consider the expediency of recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.*" further enhancing the separatists' determination for achieving independent statehood.<sup>278</sup> Apparently, Duma's pro-Abkhaz and pro-Ossetian stance has been a significant source of moral support for these separatist regimes.<sup>279</sup>

Moreover, Russia has been vitally interested in exerting its influence on the regions' political affairs in order to sustain its reputation as their biggest patron. Russia's intervention

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<sup>275</sup> By the decree issued on 24 June 1997, the Duma proposed the Russian government "*to refrain from current sanctions against the poverty-stricken population of Abkhazia for the sake of ensuring Georgia's territorial integrity.*" "Decree issued by the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation", Art 3, clause b, 24 June 1997, taken from Collection of the Legislation of the RF, 1997, # 28, p. 5538-5539, [http://www.rrc.ge/law/dekr\\_1997\\_06\\_24\\_e.htm?lawid=498&Ing\\_3=en](http://www.rrc.ge/law/dekr_1997_06_24_e.htm?lawid=498&Ing_3=en) Retrieved in 26 June 2009.

<sup>276</sup> The Abkhazian political party leaders and public political organizations sent an official letter to Boris Grizlov, the speaker of the State Duma, stating that they "*regard such a treaty with Russia as a guarantee of their economic and cultural growth and their safety.*" See "Abkhazia Asks the State Duma to Establish Relations", *RiaNovosti*, 10 February 2004. Available at <http://en.rian.ru/onlinenews/>

<sup>277</sup> See "Russian Parliamentarians Adopt Statement on South Ossetia", *RiaNovosti*, 5 August 2004, <http://en.rian.ru/onlinenews/>

<sup>278</sup> "Duma Tells Kremlin to Consider Abkhazia, S. Ossetia Recognition", *Civil Georgia*, 21 March 2008, [www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17418](http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17418)

<sup>279</sup> Lynch (2001)



in Abkhazian domestic politics became apparent during the presidential electoral process in 2004. After Sergei Bagapsh defeated his opponent, Raul Khadjimba, who was backed both by Russia and the outgoing president Vladislav Ardzinba, a ‘two-month electoral crisis flared up and Russia threatened to impose a blockade on Abkhazia. The tense situation was diffused as the election results were annulled by the Supreme Court and a deal was made between the two rival candidates in which Bagapsh ran for presidency whereas Khajimba for vice presidency.<sup>280</sup> This event resulted in the further growth of Abkhazian authorities’ dependence on Russia, revealing Moscow’s concern to keep pro-Russian administrations in the separatist regions. Similarly in South Ossetia, twice elected South Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity holds a Russian passport and is known with his pro-Russian stance.

Moreover, Russia made it clear that neither the military annexation of the separatist regions by Georgia nor Georgia’s imposition of harsh blockades would be tolerated, even if it meant the direct Russian involvement in Georgia’s conflicts. During the Moscow Summit of February 2004, Russian president Putin affirmed once more that Russia did not intend to intervene in Georgia’s internal affairs, though simultaneously sending an ultimatum to Georgia to refrain from using coercive power against Abkhazia.<sup>281</sup> In the same vein, the following month the Russian Black Sea Fleet conducted exercises in the international waters off the Georgian and Abkhazian coast. As the analyst Irina Isakova highlighted, “*Russia’s intention was also to prevent a possible blockade of the Abkhazian coast by the Georgian coast guard with potential political or practical assistance from Turkey and the US.*”<sup>282</sup>

Although the official Russian rhetoric was that the Russian Federation acknowledged and supported the territorial integrity of Georgia and that the conflicts should be resolved by political means, rather than coercive force, it has preserved its links with the Abkhaz and

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<sup>280</sup> “Bagapsh, Khajimba Sign Accord,” 4 December 2004, Civil Georgia.

<sup>281</sup> Isakova, I. (May 2004). “Russia’s Policy toward Abkhazia,” Research and Analytical Supplement (Johnson’s Russia List), special Issue no: 24. Available at [www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/8226.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/8226.cfm)

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

Ossetian paramilitary troops. Besides, it has continued to supply considerable military aid to the regions paving the way for their extensive militarization.<sup>283</sup> Furthermore, as Dov Lynch points out “*many officials holding positions in the in the separatist regions are retired Russian military or security officers.*”<sup>284</sup>

Additionally significant, Russia has been instrumental in the continued-existence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as it attempted to financially restructure and economically reintegrate the regions. The infrastructure of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia were harshly destroyed following the wars of early 1990s. As analyst S. Markedonov points out without the Russian assistance, “*the region would have suffered the same fate as the Republic of Serbian Krajina... that was ultimately reintegrated back into Croatia.*”<sup>285</sup> To begin with, across the Russian border with both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there has emerged lucrative trade on a variety of goods, including petrol and gas, available to markets in Sukhum(i) and Tskhinvali. Especially, the commercial links between these *de facto* states and Russia’s North Caucasus have been strengthened dramatically, contributing to the regions’ economic integration. Besides, the regions have gradually begun to draw in Russian private investors and companies. In this regard, Abkhazia has been more appealing than South Ossetia , due to its strategic port, natural resources and tropical climate, attracting the construction of new resort complexes and the re-establishment of industrial enterprises.<sup>286</sup>

Besides, part of the Russian strategy in the regions has been the establishment of direct transportation and communication links. Particularly, for Abkhazia resuming the railway link between Sukhum(i) and the Russian border was of great significance. With the reopening of this railway line in December 2002, as well as with the introduction of ferry

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<sup>283</sup> Winrow (2000), p. 49

<sup>284</sup> Lynch (2006), p. 48

<sup>285</sup> Markedonov (2008, 4 September)

<sup>286</sup> See Lynch (2006), p. 48. Besides, being a beautiful spot on the Black Sea coast and a cheap tourist destination, Abkhazia has attracted thousands of Russian tourists who can arrive in Sukhumi only showing their Russian passports.

transportation, it has become much easier for Abkhazians and Russians to travel and to trade along the common borders. Equally important, Russia began to contribute to the regions' development through financial assistance, such as paying for the pensions of some thousands of residents.<sup>287</sup> Highly integrated into Russian economic and financial structure, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have begun to use the Russian ruble, rather than the Georgian lari.

It is significant to mention here that Russia had been a signatory to the CIS Treaty on Abkhaz Sanctions in 1996 and had imposed an economic blockade on Abkhazia. Yet, in the following years Russian officials had turned a blind eye to the increasing trade between Russia and Abkhazia until Russia lifted all the sanctions in March 2008, announcing its withdrawal from the related CIS treaty of 1996.<sup>288</sup> The signs for this political decision were already apparent in 2004 when Putin stated, "*we think that an economic blockade, not to mention military pressure, do not result in resolving problems*"<sup>289</sup>

In addition, Russian approach towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia involved an extensive passportization policy, solidifying these separatist regions' existing reliance on Russia. Since the end of 1990s, Moscow has issued passports to Abkhazian and South Ossetian residents in place of their former Soviet period travel certificates.<sup>290</sup> Even more interestingly, in December 2000, Russia put in force a visa regime towards Georgia, imposing visa requirements on Georgians crossing the Russian border.<sup>291</sup> However, these visa requirements did not apply to Abkhazians and South Ossetians, who were already enjoying special privileges in traveling to and from Russian Federation. Eventually, ethnic Abkhazians

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<sup>287</sup> Dov Lynch asserts that Russia pays for the pensions of some 30,000 Abkhazians, chiefly the newly registered Russian citizens of Abkhazia and the pensions were approximately 20 dollars per month. Lynch received data from a research visit to Abkhazia in February 2005. See Lynch (2006) p. 48-49. Additionally, Abkhazia and South Ossetia receives substantial financial aid. For example in October 2006, Moscow Municipality announced to donate humanitarian aid worth 20 million Russian rubles to South Ossetia. "Moscow Sends Aid to South Ossetia", 14 October 2006, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge) )

<sup>288</sup> "Russia Quits Abkhaz Sanctions Treaty", 06 March 2008, Civil Georgia Report, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)

<sup>289</sup> Sepashvili, G. (2004, 17 September) 'CIS summit Reveals Rift in Russian/Georgian Relations', *Civil Georgia* Available at [www.civil.ge/](http://www.civil.ge/).

<sup>290</sup> Hill (2003).

<sup>291</sup> "A Wall of Mistrust", 19 December 2002, *Civil Georgia*.

and Ossetians, Armenians, Russians and other non-Georgians living on these two territories assumed Russian citizenship, turning both “*regions’ de facto dependence on Russia into a quasi de jure status.*”<sup>292</sup> It is claimed that an estimated 70 percent of Abkhaz and South Ossetian populations have become citizens of the Russian Federation.<sup>293</sup> A Russian passport has enabled the residents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to cross the Russian frontiers freely and gives them a chance to get education or job in North Ossetia or other parts of the Federation. Additionally, the passportization policy has provided additional leverage to Russia to interfere on Georgian soil. Eager to secure the safety and interests of these ‘Russian citizens’, Russia has repeatedly threatened Georgia to intervene into these regions’ affairs and to guard them in case of a Georgian attack.<sup>294</sup>

#### **g. Russian Peacekeeping Activities**

Peacekeeping has been a crucial instrument for Russian policy towards the conflict zones within the external territorial frontiers of the CIS, particularly in the 1990s due to the emerging environment of insecurity and uncertainty following the collapse of the SU and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Both conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia raged on Russia’s borders elevating Moscow’s anxiety regarding the region’s safety and stability, most notably of the North Caucasus. Fearing that Georgia would completely lose the control of its borders, it felt obliged to take responsibility for ending the hostilities in both of the territories.

The direct involvement of Russian troops even before the ceasefire agreement reflects the reality that Russia had a stronger incentive than any other state to do so. In this vein,

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<sup>292</sup> Hill (2003)

<sup>293</sup> The majority of Abkhaz and South Ossetian populations have indeed ‘dual citizenship’, Russian, as well as Georgian one. Russian laws have permitted the ‘dual citizenship’ which has been interpreted by the outsiders as a strategy to maintain its grasp over the ex-Soviet territories. Georgia also has allowed it fearing that the populations in these regions would secure Russian citizenship rather than Georgian one, further being disconnected from Georgia.

<sup>294</sup> . In response to Russia’s statements “*on its intention to protect its citizens in South Ossetia and Abkhazia*”, Saakashvili in stated that it was Georgia’s obligation and right to protect its citizens living on the Georgian soil. “Saakashvili says it is up to Georgia to protect its citizens,” *RIA Novosti*, 16 February 2008 from <http://en.rian.ru/world>

Russia was instrumental in the signing of the ceasefires in early 1990s, which conditioned Russian peacekeeping forces to permanently station in the breakaway enclaves, creating a buffer zone between the warring factions. Specifically, in South Ossetia, the Sochi Ceasefire agreement had foreseen the deployment of JPKF, which consisted of battalions from four parties: Russian, North Ossetian, South Ossetian and Georgian. Besides, in Abkhazia the 1994 Moscow agreement had announced the deployment of CIS peacekeeping forces along the Inguri River, the borderline between Georgia and Abkhazian controlled territories.. In particular, the CIS peacekeeping forces deployed in Abkhazia have been in practice under nominal Russian control, composing of originally around 3,000 troops converted from already existing Russian troops in Abkhazia. These troops had been heavily pro-Abkhaz oriented and in fact they had fought on the side of the Abkhazians during the war, one example being the Armenian Marshall Bagramion battalion.<sup>295</sup> In the same way, Russia has had an upper hand over the peacekeeping activities in South Ossetia since the commander of JPKF has always been of Russian nationality. Consequently, despite the CIS and JPKF cover, Russia has achieved to retain its dominance over the regions' peacekeeping operations.

Russia's strategy to form its peacekeeping forces in the conflict zones had been shaped both by the instability in North Caucasus heightened by the Chechen conflict and Shevardnadze's willingness to cooperate with Russia.<sup>296</sup> Concurrently, Russia had grasped the opportunity to strengthen its influence over Georgia and its separatist regions, using peacekeeping activities as "*an instrument for hegemonic re-engagement*"<sup>297</sup>. Eventually, Russia has maintained a balance between its interests concerning both domestic security and foreign policy. Georgia had also voiced a preference for Russian peacekeeping, in order to restore its territorial integrity and to ensure the safe return of Georgian IDPs. On the other hand, Abkhazia and South Ossetia believed that Russia would be a safeguard against a

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<sup>295</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 175

<sup>296</sup> Lynch (2000b), p. 127.

<sup>297</sup> Lynch (2000a), p. 12.

Georgian military attack, maintaining the status quo *ante* “*in circumstances propitious for the preservation of*” *their independence*.<sup>298</sup> Although their expectations were contradictory, the resulting situation was apparently desirable for all the parties involved from the vantage point of 1993.

Although in the period of 1996-2000, Russian military forces abstained from expanding their tasks in the security zone faced with the high costs of providing unilateral peacekeeping operations in the region,<sup>299</sup> after Putin came to power in 2000, Russia became even more eager to advance its hegemony in the pursuit of wider strategic interests. Consequently, the Russian strategy in the South Caucasus has been more unilateral and heavy handed. Recently, Russia has begun to articulate its support for the breakaway enclaves explicitly, threatening not only the other external actors, but also Georgia to not intervene in their affairs. As noted before, the international security organizations, notably the UN and OSCE, overwhelmed by a number of wars plaguing other parts of the world, neither achieved in controlling the conflicts in the former Soviet Union territories nor exerted enough pressure on Russia to refrain from unilateral acts regarding the regions in question. Although since the late 1990s, the external powers, particularly the US, has become more aware of their potential interests in these conflict zones and ultimately more willing to get involved into the disputes, Russia has achieved to maintain its dominant military existence within the region.<sup>300</sup>

The way of conduct and the tactics of Russian peacekeeping forces in the conflict zones along its frontiers emphasized the unique approach of Russia to keep its military existence in the former Soviet territories. In contrary to the traditional peacekeeping practices, it has been asserted that Russian peacekeeping forces have been willing to use coercive force

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<sup>298</sup> Lynch (2000b), p. 131-132.

<sup>299</sup> Lynch (2000a), p. 14-15.

<sup>300</sup> For instance, in Abkhazia UNOMIG observers were avoided to investigate the certain areas by Russian peacekeepers, when there were allegations over Russian partiality toward Abkhazia. See Lynch, “allegations of Russian partiality toward Abkhazia were to be investigated.” See Cornell (2000), p. 174.

if necessary,<sup>301</sup> while their subjective pro-separatist stance and monopolistic position has undermined its legitimacy in the eyes of the international community.<sup>302</sup>

Although Russian officials have asserted that the presence of peacekeeping forces has ensured the stability and peace in the conflict zones,<sup>303</sup> Georgia has repeatedly raised criticism for Russia's role as a 'peacekeeper'. Similarly, Western politicians and analysts have raised questions about the 'impartiality' and 'neutrality' of Russian peacekeeping activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, emphasizing their failure to provide the necessary conditions for a final political solution. Consequently, in the last decade the Georgian government has sought to expel the Russian peacekeepers in the regions and rather replace them with an international contingent. In 2005 Georgian officials threatened Russia to terminate the peacekeeping deal in case Moscow continued to back the separatist elements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>304</sup> Despite the rejection of the accusations by the Russian commander of JPKF and Russian Foreign Ministry, in June 2006 Georgia blamed Russia for deploying forces in South Ossetia exceeding the predetermined quota.<sup>305</sup> Finally, by a decree signed by Georgian Prime Minister Lado Gurgenedze in 27 August 2008, Georgia has declared the 1994 Moscow Agreement void, concluding all Russian peacekeeping operations in its territory.<sup>306</sup>

On the other hand, ethnic Abkhazians, Ossetians, as well as other non-Georgian minorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been supportive of the continued existence of Russian peacekeeping activities.<sup>307</sup> In their letter to Russian State Duma in February 10 2004, the heads of political parties and non-governmental organizations of the non-recognized

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<sup>301</sup> Lynch (2000a), p. 11

<sup>302</sup> Lynch (2000b), p. 124 and Lynch (2000a), p. 11.

<sup>303</sup> "Russia to Maintain Efforts to Protect Its Citizens Abroad," *RIA Novosti*, 10 June 2004, <http://en.rian.ru/onlinenews/>

<sup>304</sup> "Georgia Threatens to End Russian Peacekeeping Deal", October 11 2005, *RFE/RL*. Available at <http://www.rferl.org>)

<sup>305</sup> "Russia denies beefing up peacekeeping force in S.Ossetia", *RIA Novosti*, 1 June 2006. Available at [www.globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org).

<sup>306</sup> "Government Formally Scraps Russian Peacekeeping", 29 August 2008, from [www.derechos.org/nizkor/europa/caucasus/geo66.html](http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/europa/caucasus/geo66.html))

<sup>307</sup> (Art. C-4)

Republic of Abkhazia emphasized that “*the presence of the peacekeeping contingent, consisting of Russian servicemen ... helps preserve stability in the region and prevents the renewal of military actions.*”<sup>308</sup> Similarly, South Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity rejected the replacement of Russian-led peacekeeper contingent with an international one.<sup>309</sup>

#### **h. Evaluating Russia’s Role: a Peace Spoiler?**

Although the short-term Russian strategies have resembled erratic and sporadic behaviors, in hindsight it is noteworthy that Russia’s foremost long-term objective in the region has been to provide security in North Caucasus and to consolidate supremacy vis-à-vis miscellaneous external powers, in pursuit of its wider military strategic interests over its traditional sphere of influence. To elaborate, considering its historical ties with the former Soviet regions, Russia has aimed to remain as the leading figure of their new political and economic lives. Adhering to its primary intentions, Russia has played an immense role in the context of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and has secured its exclusively hegemonic position in their resolution processes. Yet, contrary to its responsibility as an arbiter and a peacekeeper, Russia has exhibited no inclination towards the settlement of the conflicts, but rather has actively supported the *de facto* states. That is to say, Russia’s role has been highly intertwined with the region’s conflicts and its ‘spoiling’ attitude has greatly contributed to their prolongation.

Russian policies were overtly or covertly designed to provide substantial political and financial support for Abkhazian and South Ossetian *de facto* states. Without a doubt, Russia has been the main contributor for the subsistence of these regions. Holding Russian passports, speaking Russian as their ‘second language’, as well as using Russian ruble, the

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<sup>308</sup> “Abkhazia Asks the State Duma to Establish Relations”, 10 February 2004, *RIA Novosti*. Available at <http://en.rian.ru/onlinenews/> In addition, Abkhaz president Bagapsh stated in June 2006 that “*there is no alternative to the Russian peacekeepers in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone.*”<sup>308</sup> See Bagapsh: No Alternative to Russian Peacekeepers”, 22 June 2006, *Civil Georgia*. [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)

<sup>309</sup> “South Ossetian Leader Comments on Peacekeepers,” 15 February 2006, *Civil Georgia*. Retrieved from [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge)



overwhelming majority of the local Abkhazian and Ossetian residents have been highly integrated into Russian realm. Additionally significant, the Duma's sympathy, together with the North Caucasian peoples' empathy for these breakaway enclaves has also played a prominent role in shifting Russia's attitude in favor of the Georgia's separatist regions. Since the end of 1990s, Russia has chosen to back Abkhazia and South Ossetia in expense of its relationship with Georgia, ultimately fortifying the determination of these regimes to sustain their *de facto* independence. Moscow has not only tolerated various forms of financial aid and economic cooperation with these breakaway enclaves, but also has aimed to *de facto* absorb the regions through improved transportation and communication links. Eventually, South Ossetian and Abkhazian authorities have held on Moscow as protector of their fragile status and indeed have begun to formally seek a level of associate relations with Russia.

On the other side, harboring the belief that Russia has orchestrated and maintained the separatist conflicts, Georgia has sought to extend the other external actors' involvement in its security affairs and internationalize the peacekeeping contingents. Faced with Georgia's increasing Western orientation and United States' rising interest in the region, Russia has been further determined to use the existence of Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts as a means of pressure against Georgia, limiting Tbilisi's freedom of maneuver in its domestic policies. Aside to this, the conflicts' prolongation has proven to be lucrative for Russia's military and strategic interests. In the absence of international commitment, Russia had taken the sole responsibility for authorizing the peacekeeping operations. Undoubtedly, Russia has desired to use its peacekeeping activities and its mediator role within the on-going negotiations as a mean to advance its strategic interests, sustaining an active role for controlling the conflicts, as well as the regions. Lingering its exclusive role in these conflicts' peace processes, as well as its military existence within Georgia and its separatist regions, Russia has gained an upper hand over South Caucasus's security mechanism. In this light, one

can easily suggest that the prolongation of Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts have gained a deal of advantages for Moscow. Hence, Georgia's separatist regions have remained within its vital sphere of interest.

Russia has long been aware that the favorable circumstances serving to its long-term security demands could only be sustained if the standstill in these conflicts persisted. Without a doubt, Russia's role has solidified the survival of these entities as *de facto* states, as well as has been part of the causal explanation for the stagnation of the peace processes. Moscow still holds its monopoly over the peacekeeping operations. Despite the CIS and JPKF cover that was initially used to justify its peacekeeping activities, Russia has failed to retain a semblance of neutrality in the conflict zones. It holds true that Russia has been unable to fulfill its task as an efficient mediator. Despite its military existence and diplomatic weight, Moscow has not been willing to pressure the conflicting sides to take steps towards a final political solution.

Apparently, Russia has contributed very little to putting an end to the hostilities in the regions, but to a large extent to the continuation of the conflicts and maintenance of the standoff in the on-going peace processes. Aiming to preserve its longstanding obligations and strategic interests, Russia has acted as a 'peace spoiler', further impeding the resolution of the conflicts. In brief, Russia's this 'spoiling' attitude can be solely explained by its desire to benefit from the conditions arising by the perpetuation of the conflicts, since it has been eager to use the existence of the conflicts as a tool to keep its military presence and dominant political role in the region and as a bargaining chip against Georgia.

### 5.2.2 The Role of the United States and NATO

The United States' involvement into the conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has been indirect, yet considerably significant. Although the US has never taken the role of a major 'mediator' in the conflict resolution process, it has been an inalienable part of the mechanisms of UN, OSCE and FoG. Its great significance within the international organizations, combined with its support for the concurring principle of inviolability of state borders has been clearly intimidating for the *de facto* authorities. In addition, its military and economic cooperation with Georgia has been interpreted by Sukhum(i) and Tskhinvali as a threat for their lasting control over their regions. Besides, Russia has viewed increasing US involvement in Georgian affairs as an impediment to its interests not only within the conflict zones, but also within the wider security complex of the South Caucasus.

The expansion of US's influence over the regions has been mainly through the Washington-led NATO, which has increasingly concentrated its attention in Georgia, primarily due to its proximity to zones with wider security concerns. The developing ties between Georgia and the Euro-Atlantic Alliance have been based on mutual benefits. Being discontent with the miniscule roles of OSCE and UN within Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia has begun to look more towards the US and NATO to mediate its local conflicts and to internationalize Russian peacekeeping contingents in the conflict zones.<sup>310</sup> Moreover, from the Georgian perspective, they have been the sole potential challengers against the Russian hegemonic position within its territory, as well as within South Caucasus boundaries.

In 1990s, the US, as well as other Western European countries had considered the security matters within Georgia peripherally, dealing with them with apathy.<sup>311</sup> Following the 11<sup>th</sup> September attacks in 2001, eager to combat with the terrorist groups ranging from Middle

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<sup>310</sup> Blank, S. (1998). "The New Trends in Caucasian Security," Eurasian Studies, no. 13, pp. 5-8.

<sup>311</sup> Coppieters, B., Trenin, D. & Zverev, A. (1998b) "Conclusions: The Failure of Regionalism in Euroasia and the Western Ascendancy over Russia's Near Abroad," in B. Coppieters, D. Trenin & Alexei Zverev (ed.), *Commonwealth and Independence in post-Soviet Euroasia*, (pp. 191-213). London: Frank Cass Publishers.

East to Caucasus, the US introduced its military into Georgia in order to assist Tbilisi in its operations to control cross-border movements in Pankisi Gorge, as well as to train and equip the Georgian army.<sup>312</sup> In addition to its military support, in 2005 US government's assistance to Georgia on a variety of spheres, reached up to 160 million USD, combined with the US humanitarian program and USAID that shipped and distributed to Georgia humanitarian commodities.<sup>313</sup> In September 2005, the US government included Georgia into the Millennium Challenge project, providing Georgia with 295.3 million USD over five years in order to improve regional development, economic infrastructure and particularly the agribusinesses in Georgia.<sup>314</sup> Most importantly, US began to broaden its diplomatic appearance in the Georgian security issues, including its separatist conflicts, enthusiastically backing Georgian demands for territorial solidarity.

Svante Cornell claims that Georgia, located in the middle of the West-East axis, ranging from US to Uzbekistan and North-South axis consisting of Russia, Armenia and Iran, has been a central actor in the competition between these rival sides.<sup>315</sup> Although the alliances have not been so rigidly formed, he correctly points out that Georgia has been a focal transit zone for the US to access the rich oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Basin and Central Asia and a strategically significant region for US's security-based aspirations. Consequently, the US has begun to pursue more active involvement in Georgia's security issues, as well as more diplomatic appearances in the peace settlements of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Apparently, the US has been eager to solve these issues in favor of Georgia, aiming to provide the stability in the region and eventually

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<sup>312</sup> In this vein, the US introduced Georgian Train and Equip Program (GTEP) in 2003

<sup>313</sup> See <http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2005/August/200508151255111CJsamohT0.5840723.html>

<sup>314</sup> Besides, in November 2008, Millennium Challenge Corporation and the Georgian Government signed a Compact Amendment making up to \$100 million of additional funds available to the Millennium Challenge project in Georgia. Retrieved from the website <http://www.mcc.gov/mcc/countries/georgia/index.shtml>

<sup>315</sup> Cornell (2000), p. 390

securing the multi-billion dollar US backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline.<sup>316</sup> On the other side, Washington's increasing support for Georgia has alarmed Russia, accentuating the fragility of the relations between the two states over the region. Although over the last decade there have been developments towards a Russia-West rapprochement, as well as for NATO's and US's cooperation with Russia for the advance of a peaceful settlement of the conflicts, the symbolic rivalry between US and Russia over the sphere of influence in South Caucasus has continued to prevail.<sup>317</sup> Ultimately, any kind of US or NATO involvement has been perceived by Russia as a threat to its strategic interests, as well as to its leading role in the conflict zones.

Additionally significant, throughout the last decade Georgia has increasingly become Western oriented because of its desire to adapt Western values and to integrate its economy to the Western framework. It also urgently needed to diversify its external sources of support, facing with a firm and dominant Russian posture. In this respect, Georgia's interest in US and in the NATO began in the period of President Shevardnadze, who was greatly advocating the expansion of NATO in the South Caucasus and who took the initiatives to deepen Georgia's relations with US, NATO and its member states, such as Turkey and Germany.<sup>318</sup> After Georgia's incumbent foreign minister Chikvaidze signed the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 1994, Georgia increasingly became an active participant of the program, building up bilateral cooperation with NATO. Shevardnadze's Western-oriented policies have been inherited by his successor Saakashvili, who has been even more eager to develop fruitful and close cooperation with the US and NATO. In line with this, Georgia agreed to develop an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP in October 2004), with the aim of joining

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<sup>316</sup> Antaleva, N. (2004, 23 Aug.) Transitions Online from the database Academic Search Complete

<sup>317</sup> Socor (2004), p. 129-131

<sup>318</sup> See Winrow (2000), p. 50. Also see <http://www.nato.int/pfp/sig-cntr.htm>.

NATO, as well as signed numerous agreements with the US on military and economic cooperation.<sup>319</sup>

Particularly, Saakashvili has believed that the greater the involvement of the US and NATO, the greater will Georgia's advantages be regarding its long-standing conflicts, as well as its country-wise development. On the other side, Abkhazians and Ossetians have feared that US's cooperation with Georgia would provide it with the strength and determination to seek military means in the resolution of the conflicts. From their perspective, the involvement of pro-Georgian US in the conflicts, will be threatening for their continuing existence, diminishing Russia's role as the patron state.

Many analysts and scholars have argued that the Euro-Atlantic community should be more actively involved, assuming direct and widespread responsibilities for conflict resolution in the regions and contributing to the internationalization of the peace process, as well as the peacekeeping contingents.<sup>320</sup> However, as long as the key players, the separatist authorities and Russia, remain deeply suspicious about US and NATO's increasing involvement in Georgia, it remains a distant prospect for them to play a vital role in the conflict resolution processes of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Though, they will certainly continue to shape the future of the region 'indirectly'.

### **5.2.3 The Role of the International Organizations: UN and OSCE**

The involvement of the international community in the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts has been predominantly through international organizations, most notably the UN and OSCE. In the case of South Ossetia, the OSCE and in the case of Abkhazia the UN have

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<sup>319</sup> Launched at the Prague Summit Declaration in 21 November 2002, IPAPs had been encouraged by NATO for the partner states to strengthen their relations with the Organization as well as developing their own priorities for cooperation both with NATO and the individual partner states. See <http://www.nato.int/issues/ipap/index.html>. Also read the Declaration in <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2002/p02127e.htm>

<sup>320</sup> Larrabee (2004); Lynch (2000b) and Japaridze T. & Rondeli, A. (2004). "Europe is on Georgia's Mind," in R. D. Asmus and B. B. Jackson (ed.), *A New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region*, (pp. 147-156). The German Marshall Fund, Washington D.C.

been one of the main custodians of the peace process on the basis of the signed agreements between a group of states consisting of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Russia, the so-called ‘Group of Friends of the UN Secretary General on Georgia’ (FoG).<sup>321</sup> In Abkhazia, the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was established in August 1993 “to verify the compliance with the ceasefire agreement between the Government of Georgia and the Abkhaz authorities in Georgia.”<sup>322</sup> Its most significant missions have been to monitor the CIS peacekeeping forces and contribute to the demilitarization of the conflict zones. On the other side, the OSCE has maintained a presence within South Ossetia since the 1993 ceasefire, in order to promote a comprehensive peace settlement and to monitor the activities of JPKF and the Georgian government. Besides, it funded development projects, such as the recent Economic Rehabilitation Program in South Ossetia.<sup>323</sup>

It is important to mention that originally neither the UN nor OSCE were interested in becoming keenly involved in the post-Soviet space, being preoccupied with conflicts elsewhere in the world. However, as the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia evolved from local conflicts in remote and isolated parts of the world into widely-known with international significance, these security organizations have begun to pursue a more active role, allocating more resources for the settlement of the conflicts. Their increasing involvement has been particularly encouraged by the West, which desired to counterbalance the prevailing position of Russia. Nonetheless, comprised of not more than 200 unarmed military observers, UN and OSCE have been, in the words of Vladimir Socor, ‘*passive bystanders*’ due to their failure to acquire an effective role in the promotion of conflict

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<sup>321</sup> Khutsishvili (2006), p. 285

<sup>322</sup> After its original mandate had been invalidated by the resumed fighting in Abkhazia in September 1993, the UNOMIG was given an interim mandate, by SC resolution 881 (1993) to promote a comprehensive peace settlement. Following the signing, in May 1994, of the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces, the SC by its resolution 937 (1994) decided to expand the mandate of the Mission and authorized up to 136 military observers. Due to the failure among SC members to agree on an extension of the mandate, the mission came to an end on 15 June 2009. For the information see the website: <http://www.unomig.org/glance/mandate>

<sup>323</sup> Reeve (2006)

resolution.<sup>324</sup> Both the UNOMIG and OSCE Mission in South Ossetia were heavily dependent on Moscow's consent, since Russia, as a participatory state of FoG and a permanent member of SC, was holding the right to veto the expansion of their mandates. Consecutively, the poor handling of the disputes have been in part due to their reluctance and inability to pressure Tskhinvali and Sukhum(i),<sup>325</sup> and in part due to Russia's heavy-handed manipulation of the conflicts in order to sustain its hegemonic pose.

Equally significant, the UN has pursued the role of a 'mediator' in both cases over the last decade. Although in the early 1990s, the UN had minimal presence in the regions, after the mid-1990s the special representatives of the UN secretary generals began to organize meetings and host delegations from both Georgia and the separatist states. They have launched negotiation talks between opposing parties under UN auspices and have issued numerous resolution and peace proposals. Regrettably, the UN has constantly failed to be successful in the mediation of the conflicts. This was not only because its leading role has been challenged by Russia, but also because it was unable to gain the trust of the separatist authorities, which firmly believed that, the UN had taken a pro-Georgian stance since the very beginning. To explore more, a number of independent analysts and Abkhaz and Ossetian politicians have claimed that the UN has not addressed their concerns, failing to treat the separatist regions in equal positions with Georgia.<sup>326</sup> Indeed, the UN was accused by Abkhaz historian and influential political figure Lakoba "*to preserve the Stalinist pattern of dividing peoples into ranks.*"<sup>327</sup>

To begin with, all UN resolutions have called for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia, undermining any possible political solution on the basis of a right to

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<sup>324</sup> See Socor, V. (May 2008), "International Organizations Passive as Russia Moves into Abkhazia," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol: 5, issue: 86. 2008

<sup>325</sup> For instance, Abkhazia has opposed the involvement of OSCE in its negotiations with Georgia, arguing that UN already plays a leading role. See Sepashvili, G. & Chanadiri 4 April 2003, "Increased OSCE Role in Abkhazia Doubtful", by Goga Chanadiri and Giorgi Sepashvili, *Civil Georgia*,

<sup>326</sup> Hewitt (1995 and Coppieters (2004)

<sup>327</sup> Lakoba (1995)



self-determination, taking a rigidly pro-Georgian stance.<sup>328</sup> On the other side, the separatist authorities repeatedly rejected to discuss any possible solution for their political statuses that would incorporate them into a Georgian framework, rendering UN resolutions increasingly pointless.<sup>329</sup> One other problem has been that the separatist regions have lacked direct access to these international security mechanisms, since they have not been considered to be sovereign states. Still, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia continued to participate in the ongoing negotiations, not because they believed that UN mediation would contribute in the conflict resolution, because they viewed using international intervention as a source of legitimacy for their authority over the regions, as well as a source of humanitarian aid.

Additionally, it was not only Abkhazian and Ossetian authorities expressing discontent for OSCE's and UN's involvement in the conflict settlements, but also Georgians, though obviously for different reasons. Georgian officials were not satisfied with their tiny roles within the regions, thus constantly demanded the expansion of their functions.<sup>330</sup> Particularly, Saakashvili's desire has been to internationalize the conflicts and to eliminate the "*exclusive role for Russia as a guarantor of peace in the regions,*" presenting Russia as a threat to the new world order.<sup>331</sup>

To sum up, the UN and OSCE could succeed neither in promoting a mutually acceptable solution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia nor in preventing the heavy militarization of the conflict zones. Preoccupied with protecting the norm of territorial integrity, the UN and OSCE have failed to express the aspirations of these separatist regions, considering them principally 'illegitimate'. The pro-Georgian stance of these international organizations eventually drove the separatist regions deeper into Russia's embrace, giving Kremlin the

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<sup>328</sup> For some examples see UN Security Council S/1996/165, S/1999/813 and S/2002/1393 from the website <http://www.un.org/documents/scres.html>.

<sup>329</sup> Coppieters (2004)

<sup>330</sup> Lynch (2006), p. 14

<sup>331</sup> Markedonov (4 September 2008)

chance to hold the upper hand both in negotiation talks and in peacekeeping operations within the conflict zones.

#### **5.2.4 International Law and Debates over Kosovo**

The debate over international legal principles has been one of the core elements of the negotiations between Georgia and its separatist regions, revealing contradictory arguments and incompatible demands. While Abkhazia and South Ossetia invoke the right to self-determination and seek international recognition, Georgia claims that they do not qualify for independence according to UN principles. The UN resolutions on these two cases have supported Georgian claims, taking a clear stand in favor of the principle of territorial integrity over self-determination. Though UN proposals have been considered the most significant and legitimate basis for the peace settlement, the international law has been generally open to confusion and controversy. Furthermore, the fact that Kosovo, an *ex-de facto* state, has achieved wide international recognition, heated the global atmosphere. Accentuating the rivalry between the principles of territorial integrity and self-determination, the debates over Kosovo have split the international community into two.

Although both have been fixed as the general and basic principles of international law, particularly the principle of territorial integrity has overridden the principle of right to self-determination in general international practice.<sup>332</sup> However, during the course of time there

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<sup>332</sup> In the post-WW 2 period, there have been introduced many international documents on the subject of the rights of nations to self-determination. For instance, Article 1 and Article 55 of UN Charter, the backbone of the international law, called for “*respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples*” (for the full text of the UN Charter <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter>) whereas Common Article 1 of the twin International Covenants on Human Rights of 1966 declared that all peoples, not just the inhabitants of colonies had the right “to determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”. For the full text of 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, see <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/cpr.html> and for the full text of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights see [http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a\\_ceschr.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ceschr.htm)) However, these legal texts were not explicitly referring to the right to secede. Equally important, the Declaration on Friendship, 1970 and the Vienna Declaration of 1993 have put a ‘safe-guard clause’ for the territorial integrity of states, declaring that the right to self-determination shall not “*be constructed as authorizing or encouraging any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent states conducting themselves in compliance with the principle of equal rights and self-determination of Peoples and thus possessed of a government representing the whole people belonging to the territory without distinction of*

have been some notable exceptions in which the international community has supported secession on the grounds of self-determination “*with the proviso that boundaries could be changed by peaceful means and by agreement.*”<sup>333</sup> Still though, in general it has championed the principle of territorial integrity due the fear of global instability.<sup>334</sup>

On the other side, the self-proclaimed republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, interpret the national self-determination principle as the inalienable right to establish sovereignty over the territories they control, which they consider their historic homelands. Thus, they bring out debates over the right to claim independence over a territory, which lies within the boundaries of another state. However, the UN SC resolutions unambiguously have acknowledged the Georgian territorial integrity, adhering to the concurring principle of inviolability of state borders.<sup>335</sup> Yet, as an Abkhaz scholar expresses, the separatist regions in Georgia have the “*growing confidence that many nations will achieve independence in the*

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*any kind (as to race, creed or color”* See Crawford, J. (2006). *The Creation of States in International Law*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press. pg. 417-418) For the full text of the ‘Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation Among States in Accordance with the Charter of the United Nations’ adopted in 24 October 1970 see <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/348/90/IMG/NR034890.pdf?OpenElement> and for the full text of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action [http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(symbol\)/a.conf.157.23.en](http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(symbol)/a.conf.157.23.en). Similarly, the Helsinki Act of 1975 constrains the right to self-determination with conformity with the principle of territorial integrity of states in an attempt to avoid conflict between them. For the full text of the Final Act of the 1975 Helsinki Conference <http://www.hri.org/docs/Helsinki75.html#H4.3>.

<sup>333</sup> Dudwick, N. (1996). “Nagorno-Karabakh and the Politics of Sovereignty,” in R. G. Suny (rev. ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, (pp. 427-440). The University of Michigan Press, p. 492.

<sup>334</sup> Indeed, the political self-determination has been achieved very rarely in the post-de-colonization period, Bangladesh being the only clear-cut example. See Crawford (2006), p. 391-393. It is worth noting that even Bangladesh was admitted into UN after Pakistani government allowed it to do so. For instance, the union-republics of the multi-ethnic federations of Yugoslavia and SU, achieved independence, not through ‘unilateral secession, but dissolution’, since the predecessor federal states as a whole ceased to exist. (See Crawford, (2006), p. 390) In the case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the divorce was arranged in a peaceful manner, with the consent of the two separating states whereas Eritrea could not achieve international recognition until it was actually supported by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, its home state.

<sup>335</sup> For UN Security Council resolutions on the issue of Abkhazia calling for ‘respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia see S/RES/1752 (2007), S/RES /1716 (2006), S/RES/1615 (2005), S/RES/1554 (2004), S/RES/1494 (2003), S/RES/1427 (2002), S/RES/1393 (2002), S/RES/1364 (2001), S/RES/1225 (1999), S/RES/1187 (1998), S/RES/1124 (1997), S/RES/1065 (1996), S/RES/971 (1995), S/RES/937 (1994), S/RES/934 (1994), S/RES/ 892 (1993), S/RES/876 (1993), S/RES/858 (1993), S/RES/ 849 (1993))

*future and a large number of new independent states will be formed.*”<sup>336</sup> This confidence has been further elevated with the developments in Kosovo since February 2008.

The recognition of Kosovo by more than 60 countries in a very short period of time after its unilateral declaration of independence has brought the issues of ‘self-determination’ and ‘territorial integrity’ on the top of the international agenda, raising concerns its probable worldwide repercussions. Particularly, being the second example of successful secession after Bangladesh, Kosovo’s new status as a widely-recognized state has fuelled heated debates around whether or not it would set a precedent for the other *de facto* states, seeking recognition.<sup>337</sup> It was definitely not a coincidence that within three weeks after Kosovo’s declaration, South Ossetia and Abkhazia called for their own international recognition.<sup>338</sup> Being by-products of communist multi-ethnic federations, neither Kosovo nor Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been granted independence following the breakdown of their federal centers, since at the time only the union-republics, which were considered to be the ‘first-level’ administrations, were allowed *de jure* status. Hence, the developments in Kosovo have encouraged Abkhazia and South Ossetia, increasing their determination to perpetuate their *de facto* status in search for international recognition.

Besides, the fact that 62 countries, including 23 EU members, have recognized the unilateral declaration of Kosovo has divided the international community, revealing the inconsistency of the international law and the way states interpret it. Particularly, the US, enthusiastically sponsored Kosovo’s independence, but paradoxically has continued to support Georgia’s territorial integrity. On the other hand, Russia, condemning the international community for backing Kosovo’s secession, declared to recognize the sovereign

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<sup>336</sup> Adzhindzhal, E. K. (2007)- Abkhazia’s Liberation and International Law, (The Public Fund for Science in Abkhazia), Sukhum from [http://www.circassianworld.com/Abkhazia\\_Liberation.html](http://www.circassianworld.com/Abkhazia_Liberation.html)

<sup>337</sup> Though accepting that many parallel ties might be drawn between Kosovo and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, this paper does not come up with a final answer to the level of Kosovo’s precedence for these two cases.

<sup>338</sup> “Abkhazia Calls for International Recognition”, 7 March 2008, [www.civil.ge/eng](http://www.civil.ge/eng), and “Georgia: South Ossetia Cites Kosovo 'Precedent' In Call For International Recognition”, 5 March 2008, [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)

state statuses of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These two examples clearly have demonstrated how international legal principles might be utilized for biased political approaches.

International law, being a doctrine introduced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has developed over years as a consequence of the evolving trends in world politics. Indeed, the history of the international principles on self-determination and territorial integrity became parallel to the trajectory of Western political thinking.<sup>339</sup> In other words, these legal norms have largely been constructed and formulated by the Western political leaders in a structure favoring the permanence- or at least stability- of their regimes. In the Abkhazian and South Ossetian cases, the international community has been predominantly reluctant to recognize them, believing that it would destabilize the whole region. However, the on-going ambiguity within the international law has opened a window of opportunity for these *de facto* states to increase their activities towards full sovereignty from Georgia, citing the Kosovo ‘precedent’ and gaining Russia’s support as well as its diplomatic recognition. In other words, inconsistency in the approaches of the international community has served to entrench the existence of these *de facto* state-lets, ultimately adding to their uncompromising stance in the peace process.

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<sup>339</sup> Gottlieb, G. (1993), *Nation against State: A New Approach to Ethnic Conflicts and the Decline of Sovereignty*, New York: Council on Foreign Affairs, p. 14.

## 6. The Evolving Dynamics after the 2008 Georgian-Russian War

The ‘five-day’ war between Russia and Georgia in early August 2008 that initiated with the eruption of the conflict in South Ossetia and ended with fierce fighting as Russian troops entered into Georgian territory, has placed itself in the historical scene of the South Caucasus as the most significant event of the new millennium. As the Georgian analyst Ghia Nodia put into words, “*the war was unexpected and anticipated at the same time*”.<sup>340</sup> Since 2006, Russia and the separatist regions on one side and Georgia on the other had repeatedly got involved in activities that were intentionally designed to provoke each other, ripening conditions for escalation. Although many analysts had warned months before the war about the danger of ensuing violence in one of the Georgia’s breakaway enclaves,<sup>341</sup> it still came as a surprise. Russia, contrary to its previous attitude, was directly involved in the conflict. What was even more unexpected was the rapidity and intensity of the Russian response.

Although in retrospect the allegations over which party initiated the first deployment of troops remain contradictory,<sup>342</sup> one thing has been for certain that Russia has easily had a military victory, with severe consequences for Georgia. The most important outcome of the war was that with the Georgian defeat, the already fragile status quo in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has finally collapsed. To refresh, status-quo refers in this essay to the status of the *de facto* states that remained persistent as the conflict resolution process failed to progress or to the lack of major attempts, at least successful ones, to shift the balance of power in favor of one side. Yet, unpredictably, this short, but sharp war has had far-reaching implications for South Ossetia and Abkhazia, bringing out immense changes in the regions’ dynamics and

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<sup>340</sup> Nodia, G. (2008, 15 August), “The war for Georgia: Russia, the west, the future”, OpenDemocracy, [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net)

<sup>341</sup> For instance, see Special Report of Centre for Eastern Studies (CES) “Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh: unfrozen conflicts between Russia and the West” published in 9 July 2008.

<sup>342</sup> For a detailed discussion on the Russia’s official claims justifying its the intervention and Georgian counter-claims see Allison, R. (2008). “Russia resurgent? Moscow’s campaign to ‘coerce Georgia to peace’”, *International Affairs*, 84:6, pp. 1151-1155.

transforming the course of the conflicts to a new phase. It also had implications for global politics, as it portrayed the new rules of the geopolitical game in the region.

To begin with, the renewed violence came with a huge number of human losses and psychological and moral depression, adding up to the hostility and deep mistrust already imprinted in the memories and perceptions of the populations in the region. The opposing sides have constantly accused each other for the outbreak of the fighting and the humanitarian crisis, with the aim to justify their moves and actions. Consequently, the level of credibility between the separatist regions and Georgia has diminished even further, wiping out all the international efforts to build confidence between the adversary sides. Besides, Saakashvili's menacing attitude has increased Abkhazian and South Ossetian determination to remain separated from Georgia. In such a highly securitized environment, the possible prospects for a mutual compromise seem to have been dashed, weightily impeding the peaceful resolution of the conflicts at least in the foreseeable future.

Second and perhaps most significantly, the August war that ended with the Georgian defeat has evaporated the hopes in Georgia to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia, terminating President Saakashvili's project of 'hearts and minds'. After coming to power, Saakashvili's main objective has been to change the context of the conflicts gradually in favor of Georgia. In this vein, it is easy to judge in hindsight that when the crisis erupted in South Ossetia, Georgia was ready to take firm actions to re-annex the separatist territories, altering the status quo to a large extent. Ironically, after the war the status quo has shifted greatly, but not in line with Georgian expectations since the latest developments have almost completely disseminated the likelihood for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity.

Third, the Georgian defeat yielded an immediate impact on the domestic political dynamics in Georgia as opposition to Saakashvili's regime grew considerably, mainly due to his poor handling of the war. For instance, in November 2008 thousands attended anti-

governmental protests, illustrating the rapidly shrinking support for Saakashvili.<sup>343</sup> Combined with the global financial crisis which deteriorated Georgia's foreign investment conditions, Saakashvili's increasingly authoritarian attitude have provided a platform for social dissatisfaction.<sup>344</sup> Yet, as International Crisis Group's report in November asserts Saakashvili's seat has remained secure, at least temporarily, since Russia's recognition of the breakaway enclaves has redirected public discontent towards Moscow.<sup>345</sup>

Fourth, the catastrophic war revealed the weakness of the Georgian armed forces and its inability to settle its separatist conflicts, raising questions over its eligibility for NATO membership. Georgia had long aimed to reintegrate its separatist regions to clear off the way to the desired membership in NATO; however with the defeat in August, Georgia's chances for accession have been substantially weakened.<sup>346</sup> Expectedly, in the NATO ministerial meeting on 2 December, the proposal for Georgia to be included in Membership Action Plan (MAP) was rejected, yet the foreign ministers reconfirmed Georgia's eventual membership.<sup>347</sup> Arguably, Georgia is likely to remain for long at the doorstep of NATO, as it has failed to resolve its separatist conflicts peacefully. It is also noteworthy that if Georgia is granted membership, NATO might come to a direct confrontation with Russia in conformity with the Article 5 of its Treaty, which obliges all member states to fight on the side of one member. However, this seems very unlikely given the high risks of such an act for NATO, as well as the re-warming of relations between Russia and NATO in recent months.<sup>348</sup>

Fifth, Georgia's irritation with Russia's role in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has reached its climax. Georgia has long been frustrated with Russia's involvement in its

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<sup>343</sup> Vartanyan, O. & Schwirtz, M. "Protesters Condemn President of Georgia", November 7, 2008)

<sup>344</sup> "Georgia: The Risks of Winter," International Crisis Group Europe Briefing, no: 151, 26 November 2008.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Foley, C. (2008, 17 December). "Keeping Watch in Georgia", [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk).

<sup>347</sup> NATO's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stated that the accession process would continue under the auspices of NATO-Georgian Commission (NGC), which was established after the war. See "US Softens Stance on Russia at NATO Summit", *NYTimes*, December 2, 2008 and <http://www.nato.int/issues/nato-georgia/index.html>)

<sup>348</sup> <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/treaty.htm>



conflicts, believing it to be the main obstacle for their settlement. In this light, it had aimed to show to the West that its conflict was actually with Russia, not with Abkhazia or South Ossetia, raising suspicion over Russia's expansionist policy in South Caucasus. Witnessing the realization of its fears with Russia's direct participation in the war, Georgia has ultimately demonized Russia, labeling it as its number one national threat. After formally cutting their diplomatic ties after the war, Georgia and Russia have not yet normalized their bilateral relations, demonstrating the unprecedented level of mutual hostility.<sup>349</sup> Indeed, keeping in line with its decision after the war, Georgia officially and finally withdrew from CIS on 18 August 2009,<sup>350</sup> symbolically quitting from the Russian realm over the former Soviet space.

Sixth, the war provided Russia with a pretext for granting recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For more than 15 years, Moscow had avoided extending formal recognition to these breakaway republics, rather upholding the principle of territorial integrity with the aim to keep its own separatist-minded regions under its authority. Yet, on 26 August 2008, Russian President Medvedev announced the enclaves' recognition, a self-proclaimed civilian and moral act confronting the violent manner of Georgian leadership.<sup>351</sup> Russia's move, which was highly condemned by the international community, especially by the US<sup>352</sup> was interpreted in Western media as partly "*retaliation for the West's support earlier this year for the independence of Kosovo from Serbia.*"<sup>353</sup>

Gaining Russia's (besides Nicaragua's) recognition has increased hopes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia for achieving their ultimate aim of becoming a member in the states' club. Backed by Russian support, these two breakaway state-lets have begun to seek new opportunities to increase their dialogue with the international community, such as the Geneva

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<sup>349</sup> "Georgia and Russia Cut Diplomatic Ties," 29 August 2008, *NYTimes*.

<sup>350</sup> "Georgia Finalizes Quitting CIS," *Civil Georgia*, 18 August 2009.

<sup>351</sup> "Medvedev's Statement on South Ossetia and Abkhazia," 26 August 2008, *NYTimes*.

<sup>352</sup> "Bush Tells Russia not to Recognize Abkhazia, S. Ossetia", 26 August 2008, *Civil Georgia*, <http://www.civil.ge/eng>),

<sup>353</sup> Levy, C. F. "Russia Backs Independence of Georgian Enclaves", 26 August 2008, *NYTimes*.

process, if not yet to achieve recognition.<sup>354</sup> Moreover, Russian recognition, as acclaimed by Russian officials, has provided these separatist regions guarantees for protection from future Georgian military attacks.<sup>355</sup> On the other hand, the informal dependency of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on Russia has eventually become formal with the recognition. Dependence on Russia for years has been an alternative option for these separatist regions to the reunification with Georgia. After the recognition, Russia has obtained a chance to exploit resources in these regions, which became legal and profitable for Russians. For instance, Russia's state-run oil company Rosnet has signed an agreement with Abkhazia to explore its naval oil fields.<sup>356</sup> Although the opposition groups particularly in Abkhazia have claimed too much dependence on Russia might bring negative economic consequences,<sup>357</sup> Russia has substantially increased its presence in the regions after the war, extending far beyond the provision of financial aid.

Seventh, taking Abkhazia and South Ossetia formally under its shelter, Russia has sought to strengthen its military existence in the regions. Immediately after the war, Moscow unilaterally declared 'additional security measures' and established security zones adjacent to the South Ossetian and Abkhazian administrative borders.<sup>358</sup> After the negotiations with EU in September, Russia had agreed to pull out of these buffer zones and allow the EU observers to sustain security in the outer lines, but however refused to withdraw from the separatist regions despite the requirements of the six-point ceasefire.<sup>359</sup> Without a doubt, Russia has shown its reluctance to leave Abkhazia and South Ossetia, by announcing to double its troops in the regions, as well as by refusing to allow the EU mission to access the territories within them. Moscow claims that "*realities have changed*" after it granted them recognition.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> "Abkhazia seeks to develop contacts with intl community"- FM", *ITAR-TASS*, 9 July 2009.

<sup>355</sup> "Russian recognition of S-Ossetia, Abkhazia guarantees absence of new attacks", 19 May 2009.*ITAR-TASS*.

<sup>356</sup> "Abkhazia and the Perils of Independence", June 19, 2009, *RFE/RL*.

<sup>357</sup> "Despite Russian recognition, Abkhaz prospects uncertain", *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 9, 2009, [www.hurriyetdailynews.com](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com)

<sup>358</sup> Allison (2008), p. 1158-1159

<sup>359</sup> The agreement had asked all sides to withdraw their forces to the positions they held before the war.

<sup>360</sup> "Russia begins final pull-out from Georgia buffer zone", *guardian.co.uk*, 8 October 2008.

Furthermore, Moscow has pledged to establish military bases for the Russian troops to permanently settle in the regions despite Georgian protests and Western criticisms.<sup>361</sup> Indeed, by October, Russia had already begun to build a garrison in South Ossetia between Tskhinvali and its border, designed to accommodate more than 2000 soldiers.<sup>362</sup> According to the official announcements so far, Russia will not build new bases in Abkhazia, but rather will reconstruct the former Soviet bases in the region, the air base at Gudauta and the naval base at Ochamchire.<sup>363</sup> Recognizing the administrative borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as their official frontiers, Russia has signed bilateral agreements with them on joint protection of the state borders, initially for a five-year term.<sup>364</sup> Guarding these breakaway enclaves' frontiers, Russia has deliberately intended to turn these regions into *de facto* Russian territories and avoid any possible Georgian move towards the regions.

Eighth, one of the most considerable consequences of the August war has been the major change in negotiation formats, as well as in the perceived role of Russia as the key mediator in the conflicts. Before the war, negotiations were unilaterally dictated by Russia, who was accepted to be the arbiter of the negotiation talks, as well as the sole peacekeeper of the regions since the early 1990s. UNOMIG in Abkhazia and OSCE mission in South Ossetia had only had a partial involvement, holding discussion in the relevant task forces and working groups and observing the negotiations and peacekeeping activities. Ignoring all the Georgian calls to change the negotiation and mediation formats and to internationalize the peacekeeping activities, Russia had set its foot firmly in the regions. However, after the war Russia has lost

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<sup>361</sup> "EU 'Concerned' over Russia Base Plans in Abkhazia, S. Ossetia, *Civil Georgia*, 6 February 2009. Before the war, Moscow was denying the allegations that it was planning to deploy military bases in the regions "Russia Denies Planning Military Base in Abkhazia", June 12 2007, *RFE/RL*.

<sup>362</sup> "Russian Troops Dig in For Long Stay in South Ossetia", October 10, 2009, *RFE/RL*.

<sup>363</sup> "Sukhumi Confirms Plans to Base Russian Warships in Ochamchire", 27 January 2009, *Civil Georgia*. and "Abkhaz FM Says Bases will be Renovated for Russian Troops", 18 October 2008, *Civil Georgia*. Besides, it is remarkable to note that after Russia declared that its leave from the military base in Gudauta in 2001, it had not allowed any observers to confirm the withdrawal. Since then, Georgian officials have continued to express their doubts about Russian military existence in the base. See "Georgian, Russian Foreign Ministers Spar on 'Rhetoric', *Civil Georgia*, 30 November 2007.

<sup>364</sup> "Russia To Defend Abkhazia, South Ossetia Borders", *RFE/RL*, March 20, 2009, and "RF, Abkhazia, S. Ossetia sign 5-year deal to protect state borders", *ITAR-TASS*, 30 April 2009.

its credibility as a mediator in the eyes of the international community, proving itself to be a direct rather than impartial party to the conflicts.

Since Russia has no longer been perceived as a neutral arbiter, the international community has begun to seek an internationalized negotiation format. In this regard, Geneva talks initiated in 15 October 2008 hosted UN, OSCE and EU as the joint mediators as well as Russia, US and Georgia as the official partners. Before the talks, Russia declared that it would not attend the meeting on Abkhazia and South Ossetia if delegations from Sukhum(i) and Tskhinvali were not seated at the negotiation table on equal par with the other participants. Similarly, Ossetian and Abkhazian authorities insisted on their involvement in the negotiations along with Georgian and Russian delegations as the official representatives of their 'states'.<sup>365</sup> Eventually, the first round of Geneva talks failed while the next rounds were relatively more successful, but nevertheless after the six rounds of talks up to 1 July 2009, very little progress was visible.<sup>366</sup>

Ninth, with the new developments after the war, the role of the UN, OSCE and EU in the conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have largely shifted since the UN and OSCE have ceased their monitoring operations within the regions whereas the EU emerged as the most significant organization in the conflict resolution process. Although the UN and OSCE have been involved in the new negotiation mechanism as mediators in the Geneva talks, their roles have shrunk considerably following Russia's veto over the extension of their missions in Georgia and its separatist regions, in May and June 2009 respectively. Russian veto came due to arising contradiction over whether treating Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign

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<sup>365</sup> "Geneva Talks on Georgia Get Off to Rocky Start," 17 October 2008, *RFE/RL*.

<sup>366</sup> Geneva talks have so far focused on security arrangements as well as humanitarian questions. The most significant outcome of the recent talks was that South Ossetian, Russian and Georgian sides agreed the establishment of 'incident prevention mechanisms' to avoid a future conflict along the borderlines. See "Sides Meet at S.Ossetian Administrative Border," *Civil Georgia*, 23 April 2009 and "Fifth Round of Talks End in Georgia," *Civil Georgia*, 19 May 2009.

states or as Georgian districts.<sup>367</sup> The fact that Russia as a member of OSCE and a permanent member of UN SC has the right to veto every decision given by these organizations has raised questions over their capability to resolve disagreement among their member states. On the other hand, Russia's termination of nearly sixteen year old missions has arguably demonstrated the new Russian strategy, which aims to use the 'recognition' card to oppose the international community's involvement within the territories.

Russian opposition to UN and OSCE missions has provided opportunities for the EU to develop its role within the conflict resolution mechanisms of the region. Before the war, no European leader had showed specific interest in Georgia's separatist conflicts and EU's involvement in the region had mainly focused on humanitarian issues such as rehabilitation and development programs.<sup>368</sup> By strengthening the mandate of the European Union Special Representative (EUSR) Team<sup>369</sup> in January 2006, the EU had assumed greater liability in the region with special focus on its engagement in post-conflict reconstruction.<sup>370</sup> However, its real active involvement in this critical region came after the August war by playing a key diplomatic role mediating the warring parties.

After the crisis erupted in August, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, holding the EU's rotating presidency, became the key mediator of the conflict, brokering the initial six-point armistice on 12 August 2008, as well as the addendum of September 8. With his successful diplomatic initiative, not only a ceasefire was signed, but also the continuation of the violence was prevented with the rapid demilitarization of the conflict zones. Recognizing the significance of stability beyond its eastern borders, the EU has progressively acquired responsibility for post-conflict management with the deployment of EUMM (EU Monitoring Mission), designed to observe the ceasefire and the withdrawal of Russian troops from the

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<sup>367</sup> See [www://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unomig](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unomig) and Barry, E. "European Group to End Georgia Mission", December 22, 2008, *NYTimes*.

<sup>368</sup> Lynch, (2006), p. 64

<sup>369</sup> EUSR Team has officially opened in 1 September 2005 in Tbilisi.

<sup>370</sup> Lynch (2006), p. 65

buffer zones within Georgian territory after 1 October 2008.<sup>371</sup> Paradoxically, Russia's termination of UNOMIG and OSCE missions in the region has left EUMM the sole observer mission in which Russia has no authority to interfere.<sup>372</sup> However, Russia has refused to permit the EUMM to have access to territories within either Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Thus, EU's engagement in the region is likely to be interrupted by Moscow's willingness to retain control and administer the rules of any EU involvement.<sup>373</sup>

Lastly, the war also tested the level of US and NATO's involvement in the region, which however gradually waned against Georgian expectations. Immediately after the war, although the US and NATO reverted from directly interfering in the conflict, they firmly opposed Russia's hegemonic posture and actions in Georgia, as acclaimed by the incumbent US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, straining the relations between Moscow and Washington.<sup>374</sup> Russia's announcement of the suspending the implementation of CFE Treaty had already created a wall of mistrust between the NATO countries and Russia.<sup>375</sup> After the war, NATO decided to suspend the future meetings of NATO-Russia Council.<sup>376</sup> Similarly, Russia decided to sever its diplomatic relations with the alliance, expressing its complaints about NATO's pro-Georgian stance, as well as the threatening presence of its vessels in the Black Sea.<sup>377</sup> Although the rising tension between Russia and Washington-led alliance was exaggeratedly interpreted in the Western media as the resurgence of the 'Cold War',<sup>378</sup> it soon became clear that NATO and Russia had too much at stake to resort in a direct confrontation.

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<sup>371</sup> EUMM has deployed 300 observers in the security zones "War in Georgia", updated in 12 February 2009, ICG, <http://www.crisisgroup.org>

<sup>372</sup> "Russia welcomes extension of EU monitoring mission in Georgia", *ITAR-TASS*, 27 July 2009

<sup>373</sup> Barysch, K. (2008, 30 Sept.) "Europe and the Georgia-Russia Conflict," Open Democracy. Available in the website: [http://www.cer.org.uk/articles/barysch\\_opendemocracy\\_30sept08.html](http://www.cer.org.uk/articles/barysch_opendemocracy_30sept08.html)

<sup>374</sup> "Georgia conflict could set back Russia's US relations 'for years'." *guardian.co.uk*, 14 August 2008

<sup>375</sup> Boese, W. (May 2008), "Russia Unflinching on CFE Treaty Suspension," Arms Control Association. Available at [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008\\_05/RussiaCFE](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_05/RussiaCFE)

<sup>376</sup> Smith, J. (Nov. 2008). "The NATO-Russia Relationship, Defining Moment or Déjà vu?" CSIS (Center for Strategic & International Studies. Available (pdf) at [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/081110\\_smith\\_natorussia\\_web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/081110_smith_natorussia_web.pdf)

<sup>377</sup> Levy, C. J. (2008, 26 August). "Russia Backs Independence of Georgian Enclaves", *NYTimes*.

<sup>378</sup> Rodriguez, R. (2008, 22 August) "Georgia-Russia conflict brings back Cold-War memories," *CNN*. Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/US/08/22/cold.war.irpt/index.html>

As such, NATO has reopened its dialogue with Moscow while the US and Russia have initiated bilateral negotiations on offensive arms reduction with the first round of talks taking place in May 2009. The US-Russia negotiations on START seem to determine the future of their reciprocal relations to a great extent, as well as the level of US's intention and ability to press Russia to mollify its aggressive stance in South Caucasus, most notably in Georgia.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Erlanger, S. (2008, 2 December). "US Softens Stance on Russia at NATO Summit" and Feigenhauer, P. (2009, 25 June). "U.S.-Russia Moscow Summit Presents Last Opportunity to Avoid War in Georgia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol: 6, Issue: 122.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

With the current developments last summer, international attention has once again been directed to South Caucasus. What constitutes the fascination that underpins the region is not only that for years it has played host to fierce ethnic tensions and regional divisions, but also its historical affinity to attract the competition for influence among the great powers for this tiny, but geopolitically significant land. Located at the edge of both European and Middle Eastern security spaces, the region has been prone to the political games of external actors. Hence, it witnessed complicated and inter-related political, strategic, socio-economic events and in particular violent conflicts since the end of the Soviet rule. Being among the most troublesome ex-Soviet republics of the region with its two ethnic separatist conflicts, namely, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, Georgia has been an arena of political turmoil and constant warfare. The persistence of these conflicts has not only been the major obstacle to peace and stability in Georgia, but in the whole region.

In this vein, this paper has aimed to illustrate, through a systematic analysis of a broad range of structural and interactive conflict prolonging factors, those underlying features that determine the course of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It has been argued these conflicts have been intractable in nature depicting those inherent properties that by definition contribute to the persistence of the stalemate in the conflict resolution process. What is more, the dynamic forces that drove the sustainability of the *de facto* state structures have evolved through the last two decades in a fashion that both complicates and impedes the peace settlement, while transforming the parameters that shape the underlying context. As established, the level of intractability of these conflicts has shifted over the course of time, but nevertheless has remained stable in that the conflicts have never displayed tractable qualities, blocking the possibility of arriving at a moment for transcending their insolubility. As such, the evolving context and the embryonic features of the conflict have given rise to a wide



range of conflict prolonging factors that obstruct the resolution process. Hence, the analysis of this broad range of conflict prolonging factors has been imperative for developing an understanding of the reasons behind the protracted nature of these conflicts, as well as explaining the combination of elements that stagnates the conflict resolution process in these two specific cases.

The dynamics, spoiling the materialization of necessary conditions for the progress in conflict resolution and thus crystallizing the peace process into an impasse, have involved a multitude of players and motives, directly or indirectly determining the impenetrable characteristics of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Consequently, within the already established background that has been shaped by long-term dynamics, there has emerged a large array of internal and external forces which interact to plague the conflict resolution process. To begin with, long-term conflict prolonging factors are embedded within the very structure of the conflicts and thus less amenable to alteration. These involve historical cleavages, competing nationalist projects, ethno-demographic perspectives, as well as 'constructed' ethnic identities that ultimately generate a mixture of perceptions that produce incompatible demands and ethnically-divided societies. In particular, this ethnic dimension outlined within the historical context has invariably added to the pervasiveness and durability of the unresolved situation of the conflicts.

On the other hand, short-term conflict prolonging factors are constantly evolving and open to change. These refer to a number of internal and external dynamics that have been formed predominantly within the geo-political, economic and political context concomitant to the progress of the conflicts. In order to simplify the impact of such factors, they have been categorized mainly as key actors and their intentions. Although analyzed in isolation, it has been concerted that only by considering their organic interaction can one achieve to draw a complete picture of the conflicts and their underlying forces. As such, a portion of the actors

involved in the conflict, by pursuing their perceived self-interests, have resorted in either intentional or unintentional spoiling behaviour. Besides, some other actors, as well as a number of miscellaneous factors, have directly or indirectly contributed to the spoiling activities.

The directly engaged parties to the conflicts, that is Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia, have deliberately or not, implemented policies that resulted in the fortification of the impasse in the peace processes. In particular, the Abkhazian and South Ossetian *de facto* states have developed a structure in which the forces driving their subsistence have simultaneously combined to impede the conflict resolution process. In spite their very statehood has remained at stake, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have survived years of international isolation, achieving to endow with almost full control over their local populations. Their lasting lives can be explained by the internal forces stimulating their endurance compiled with Russia's active support, perpetuating the conflicts propitious for the preservation of their *de facto* statuses.

Being on the victorious side of the armed struggles in early 1990s has imprinted a fundamental intolerance regarding their absolute sovereignty, forging the idea of forming an independent state that has been institutionalized by the establishment of the basic attributes of statehood. With the intention to protect their fragile statehoods against the perceived Georgian threat, has emerged a mental thinking in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that rendered the military power and the illegal trade as the main vehicles for their subsistence. As a result, it has created many groups either inside or outside of them, who have been gaining considerable benefits from the maintenance of the conflicts.

Additionally significant, fearing to lose their local level of power and taking a radical stance, Abkhazian and South Ossetian leaderships have effectively used nationalist tools, as well as the constructed ethnic identities and the 'them-us' illustration to justify their demands

over jurisdiction in their territories. Subsequently, a perceptual understanding has prevailed in these *de facto* states in which lack of credibility against Georgia has materialized, generating a state of suspended conflict. What is more, the prejudiced perceptions of the past amassed with the constant fear of a possible Georgian military assault ultimately have produced an elevated level of animosities, hindering the encouraging atmosphere in the peace talks.

On the other hand, Georgian policies that for long have intended to push Abkhazians and South Ossetians towards conceding to Tbilisi's demands over the protection of the country's territorial integrity. These policies have paradoxically consolidated the existence of its breakaway enclaves, both intentionally and unintentionally spoiling the conflict resolution process. First, the fact that Georgia was unable to attract the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, failing to qualify as a strong and prosperous country has remained a perceptual barrier for the integration of these regions into Georgia. Suffering from economic and political difficulties, mafia-style activities and lack of diplomatic potency Georgia could not achieve to be appealing for these regions, further fortifying their determination for political separatism.

In addition, the fact that Tbilisi has attempted to use military power and economic sanctions to induce Abkhazia and South Ossetia into a final compromise has added to the resentments in these *de facto* states, generating negative effects for the conflict resolution process. Georgia's harsh economic blockades on Abkhazia have not only forged a sense of mistrust, but also contributed to the logic driving its continued existence, pushing it to develop an efficient economic structure essential for its subsistence. Furthermore, even before the 2008 war in South Ossetia, Tbilisi's threatening rhetoric, the boost in Georgian military spending, as well as the increasing build-up of its armed forces had alarmed the separatist regions, engendering constant mood of insecurity. With the Georgian military deployment on

South Ossetia in August 2008, the fears aroused by the constantly perceived Georgian threat have been ultimately materialized, damaging the prospects for the settlement of the conflicts.

Shevardnadze, the previous Georgian leader who ruled the country for twelve years, had pursued sort of a 'non-policy' towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He was willing neither to accept the separatist aspirations nor to encourage a compromise on the negotiation table with the *de facto* authorities, harboring the belief that the status quo *ante* was more preferable than facing with a total failure. On the other hand, Saakashvili, enjoying a broad support of electorates, was determined to exert Georgian control over the separatist regions putting an end to the impasse in the peace settlements. However, the latest developments have revealed that Saakashvili's strategy directed to alter the dynamics within the context of the conflicts in favor of Georgia have ironically succeeded to do the opposite, hampering the ability to reach a conflict resolution indefinitely.

The lion's share of responsibility for the current situation that has underpinned the solidification of a stalemate in the conflict resolution processes can be attributed to Russia as the 'outside protector' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who have been very influential in blocking the peace settlements and rendering the survival of these *de facto* states. Although initially it was labeled as an external actor, confronting Georgia in August 2008 in South Ossetia, Russia has turned out to be a directly engaged player of the region's conflicts. Even before the war though, Russia has been invariably intertwined with the on-going conflicts, lingering its exclusive role in their peace processes, as well as its military presence within Georgia. Although Russia has been from the outset the leading peacekeeper and mediator in both of the cases, it has taken an overt stance on behalf of the separatist states. Moscow's policies designed to provide moral, diplomatic and financial support for the breakaway regions, entitling their citizens eligible for Russian citizenship, have been viewed by Georgians as a political tool to vitiate its gradual integration with the Euro-Atlantic structures.

Russia's involvement in the region's conflicts can be explained by a combination of a variety of its military, strategic and political motives. Russia has been enthusiastic to reassert its hegemony in the post-Soviet space. Besides, feeling anxious due to the danger of instability along its southern frontiers, Russia has sought to retain its military presence in Georgia and its separatist regions in order to avoid the resurgence of the 'Chechnya disaster'. To elaborate, Russia has understandably been keen in providing stability in North Caucasus and sustaining its traditional sphere of influence. Keeping in line with its primary objectives, it has sought to maintain an exclusive role in the resolution processes of the conflicts, exceeding the constraints of its potential role as a mediator and a peacekeeper. Playing an immense role in the conflicts, Russia has exhibited no inclination towards their settlement, but rather has contributed to the prolongation of the conflicts, which has been of vital significance to the endurance of the *de facto* states, Russia's controlling interests in perpetuating the insolubility of the conflicts have further fueled the separatist states' determination to revert from granting any concessions regarding their sovereignties. Without a doubt, Russia's spoiling attitude has been crafted with its desire to benefit from a great deal of advantages created by the impasse in the conflicts, manipulating the existence of this deadlock as an instrument to preserve its hegemonic position in the region, as well as a bargaining chip against Georgia.

Perceiving a threat of Russian expansionism, Georgia has increasingly relied on the West, most notably on Washington to solve its problems. As the major backer of the BTC and South Caucasus pipeline projects, the US has a calculating interest in partaking in the region's conflicts and providing its stability. Accordingly, it has not only broadened its diplomatic appearance in the Georgian security affairs, but also has begun to provide assistance to Georgia for the advance of its military capacity. The US's increasing interest in the region has accentuated the perceptual rivalry with Russia who perceives any Euro-Atlantic involvement

in the region as a threat to its strategic benefits. The indirect, yet considerable roles of the US and NATO in the conflicts have been influential in deteriorating relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, as well as alarming the *de facto* states over a possible shift in the balance of the conflicts towards the Georgian side.

Moreover, the picture will not be entirely clear if the roles of the international community and the international law in the context of the conflicts are excluded. Particularly, until the war in 2008, the UN and OSCE were the major international organizations mediating the conflicts and monitoring the Russian-led peacekeeping activities. However, they could succeed in neither promoting a political compromise, nor in avoiding the heavy militarization of the conflict zones. Preoccupied with protecting the principle of ‘territorial integrity’, which has been a controversial and vague norm of the international law, they failed to consider the demands of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, further driving these regions into Russia’s embrace. After the war, both the UN and OSCE’s influence in the region has considerably shrunk whereas EU has assumed greater responsibility in the conflict resolution mechanisms.

It is remarkable to note that, although Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts have generally resembled common trends, they have also engendered case-specific peculiarities. Particularly, in South Ossetia the ethnic affinity with the North Ossetians has been a major factor for the region’s economic and political integration into the North Caucasus community as well as its developing ties with Russia. What is more, South Ossetia has not been an appealing spot like Abkhazia due to its lack of industrial infrastructure and export-oriented agriculture, rendering it more dependent on illegal activities for sustaining its subsistence. Although Abkhazia has been a bigger prize for Georgia with its lucrative resources as well as with its strategic port of Sukhum(i), it has also been a more difficult target. This explains why Tbilisi has directed its reunification plans initially on South Ossetia, rather than on Abkhazia

Equally important, in the Abkhazian case the conflict resolution process has been more complex and open to dead-lock, due to the lingering presence of the IDP question. With the constant fear of being turned into a minority in their perceived homeland, Abkhazians have rejected any peace proposal that conditioned all-and-once return of these IDPs. Conversely, the Abkhazian government in-exile has constantly pressured Tbilisi not to concede from these refugees' aspirations. Eventually, the contradictory demands of these ethnically Georgian refugees and the Abkhaz authorities have not allowed the resolution of this problem, further strengthening the forces behind the impasse in the settlement of the Abkhazian conflict.

The war in August 2008 has brought immense changes in the regions' dynamics, transforming the course of the conflicts and ultimately altering the status quo. With the recognition of Kosovo's independence by more than sixty countries, the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had already begun to shift into a more intractable phase, as the *de facto* states raised claims over Kosovo's precedence for their own statuses. After the war, the intractability of the conflicts has reached to an unprecedented level, since the separatist regions have enhanced their motivation to remain detached from Georgia. This has diminished the Georgian hopes for its territorial integrity, as well as its prospects for NATO membership. Moreover, taking the separatist regions into its realm and granting them recognition, Russia has proved itself to be a direct party to the conflicts, draining its reputation as a credible mediator.

Furthermore, the latest events have raised questions over the stability of the conflicts and the likelihood of their future explosiveness. The absence of large-scale conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia for over fifteen years had reinforced a misleading image that a level of stability was enshrined in the course of the conflicts, which were generally labeled as 'frozen' in the international parlance. In reality though, since the very end of the wars in early

1990s the regions have been trapped in a chaotic stalemate in which sporadic clashes have been flaring, perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence.

It is remarkable in retrospect that Abkhazian and South Ossetian cases have displayed some disparities in their level of 'stability'- or better to say in their level of proneness to violence- throughout the progress of their conflicts. Since the 1993 ceasefires, Abkhazia has always been host to perilous incidents, such as military maneuvering and occasional fighting along the Inguri River, as well as large-scale skirmishes in the Gali district, exhibiting the constant and high level of insecurity. On the other hand, in South Ossetia in the period of 1992-2004, confidence building measures were enhanced, surfacing a certain level of stability in which a serious acceleration of fighting was avoided. With the conflict in 2004 summer, which broke the existing stability in the region, South Ossetia eventually became prone to the danger of ensuing violence. Thus, in both of these cases the conditions were already ripe for escalation in August 2008 when Russia's assertive stance compiled with Georgia's aspirations of restoring its territorial integrity has ultimately triggered a crisis. From the vantage point of today one can easily suggest that the possibility for renewed violence in both of these separatist regions is very high, with the future remaining uncertain and unpredictable.

To conclude, Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts have been violent and durable as a result of their intractability, materializing the ensuing deadlock in the resolution processes. As acknowledged in this paper, in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia a complex web of overlapping players has found a space to maneuver the conflicts, as such a large array of dynamic forces has accounted for the current impediments, stimulating the persistence of these *de facto* states and of the standstill in the conflict settlements. Not only should it be recognized that a multitude of actors have accumulated for the creation of the contemporary stalemates in these two cases, but also that some actors have been more powerful than the others in affecting the parameters of the conflicts.



Particularly, external forces have dictated the course of the conflicts as the internal actors have been prone to heavy-handed manipulation due to their structural and diplomatic weakness. Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as the internal players of the conflicts have failed to maintain the driver's seat in the on-going conflict resolution mechanisms. As the outside actors have competed to extend their control over Georgia and more broadly over the South Caucasus security complex, they have sought to oblige the domestic players to comply with their strategic aspirations. Particularly, Russia and the US have aimed to increase their relations with the directly engaged parties of the conflicts so as to enhance their authority over the region. On the other side, Georgia and the *de facto* authorities have been reluctant to compromise, but instead have been looking for foreign support to back their unyielding demands. Indeed, they have begun to use their alliances with these powerful external players as a bargaining chip against each other. This subsequently has strengthened the roles these external actors play in influencing the dynamics driving the conflicts, as well as has made Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia vulnerable to foreign exploitation. In line with their self-interested motives, the powerful external players have intentionally or unintentionally spoiled the peace processes, contributing to the prolongation of the conflicts. Thus, the irreconcilable demands and clashing interests within such a geopolitically competitive environment have been inextricably linked to the persistence of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Besides, the failure of the international community to promote a mutually acceptable solution has further added to the solidification of the stalemates.

What is more, Georgia has chosen to ascribe the insolubility of its problems to an 'external enemy', asserting that Russia has endeavoured to exploit the ethnic divisions in the regions. It is beyond doubt that Russia's involvement in these conflicts has served to entrench the continued existence of these *de facto* states. Benefiting from the conditions existed by the maintenance of the conflicts, Moscow has intentionally pursued spoiling activities, ultimately

blocking the peace settlements. Yet, holding solely Russia responsible for the on-going standoff between Tbilisi and its separatist regions is a deficient observation, since Russia's role has been a partial explanation for the prolongation of the conflicts. A number of directly or indirectly engaged parties have secured their role in the course of the conflicts and they have more or less contributed to the persistence of the impasse in the peace processes. As suggested in this paper, deeply understanding these case-specific actors and dynamics, as well as their combined effect, which have delayed or hindered the resolution processes, will provide a valuable insight for designing new frameworks to settle the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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