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**The analysis of the Russo-Georgian relationships after the
2008 August War: a territorial matter**

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ABSTRACT

Questa tesi fornisce una descrizione precisa e dettagliata degli eventi che hanno influenzato i rapporti tra Russia e Georgia a partire dall'agosto 2008, periodo in cui si è svolta una breve ma importante guerra tra i due Paesi, la quale ha avuto una importante risonanza a livello geopolitico globale. Lo scopo finale dell'elaborato è quello di offrire nuovi punti di vista e nuove basi di partenza per provare a trovare una soluzione alla complessa situazione creata nella regione.

Il lettore troverà sei capitoli illustrati in ordine cronologico: il primo descrive brevemente gli eventi della guerra svoltasi nell'agosto 2008, il perché è stata una guerra "piccola" ma degna di nota e il ruolo degli attori europei nel percorso che ha portato al cessate il fuoco. Vengono sottolineati, per entrambe le parti, i comportamenti sbagliati che hanno avuto come conseguenza lo scoppio della guerra, di come entrambi gli attori siano da biasimare: non solo le azioni russe che hanno incrementato la tensione, ma anche le sconsiderate azioni georgiane culminate con il bombardamento della capitale dell'Ossezia del Sud Tskhinvali. Inoltre, viene descritto in maniera accurata l'accordo di cessate il fuoco mediato dalla Francia, portavoce dell'Unione Europea durante il conflitto, e di come questo accordo sia stato una vittoria solo parziale, perché ha evidenziato la debolezza dell'UE al di fuori del proprio territorio e come mediatrice di conflitti. Ancora, viene data enfasi al perché questo conflitto così circoscritto e poco conosciuto, abbia aperto il mondo ad un nuovo tipo di guerra, introducendo per la prima volta nella storia, oltre che a truppe aeree e terrestri, attacchi cibernetici ad infrastrutture mirate.

Il secondo capitolo espone la strategia russa di lento spostamento del confine, denominata "borderization" e quali implicazioni ha sulla popolazione e sulla sicurezza energetica dell'area. Vengono illustrati due casi chiave, quelli di Archil Tatunashvili e Zaza Gakheladze, che raccontano le difficoltà della popolazione georgiana che vive lungo il confine. All'interno del capitolo sono presenti non solo le dichiarazioni da parte delle autorità georgiane, ma anche le dichiarazioni russe, dei territori separatisti e di attori internazionali come gli Stati Uniti. Il capitolo si conclude con un approfondimento sul perché questo spostamento del confine è pericoloso anche per la sicurezza energetica della regione, soprattutto per quanto concerne l'oleodotto Baku-Supsa.

Nel terzo capitolo viene fatta una fotografia della situazione interna nelle due regioni separatiste di Abkhazia e Ossezia del Sud, evidenziando i rapporti che queste hanno con Georgia e Russia, e di come gli aiuti di quest'ultima siano fondamentali per la loro sopravvivenza. Viene messo in risalto come la Russia abbia subito vincolato queste due zone a sé con accordi di cooperazione e mutua assistenza sia sul piano economico, che militare. Di rilievo è la parte riguardante i dati concernenti il volume degli aiuti economici russi ai due territori. È presente anche una spiegazione del perché esiste una possibilità di dialogo tra la Georgia e le regioni separatiste.

Il quarto capitolo enfatizza il ruolo di svolta che hanno avuto le elezioni parlamentari in Georgia nel 2012, nel 2016 e le elezioni presidenziali del 2018; dimostra come la caduta di Saakashvili e, di conseguenza, l'ascesa di Ivanishvili con il suo partito Georgian Dream, abbiano fatto rinascere la speranza di un dialogo tra Mosca e Tbilisi, nonostante le continue proteste dell'opposizione durante le elezioni. Le elezioni del 2012 hanno portato alla sconfitta di Saakashvili, persona odiata dal governo russo, aprendo un periodo di distensione tra i due Stati, che ha favorito una ripresa del turismo e degli scambi economici. Queste elezioni sono state importanti anche perché è stata la prima volta che, in uno stato post-sovietico, il governo è stato eletto attraverso una votazione e non attraverso delle proteste. Nel capitolo si trovano anche i rapporti che la Georgia ha con il resto del mondo, e delle conseguenti reazioni che questi provocano in Russia. Attraverso dati e statistiche viene messo in risalto come la popolazione georgiana, anche durante le elezioni del 2016, sia perlopiù indecisa su chi votare e di come ha richiesto, con successo, l'abbassamento della soglia di sbarramento per l'entrata in parlamento dei partiti. Il capitolo si conclude con le elezioni presidenziali del 2018, che hanno visto la vittoria della candidata di Georgian Dream Salome Zurbishvili e delle implicazioni che ciò ha portato nel Paese anche mettendo in evidenza quanto, col tempo, GD abbia perso consensi.

Nel quinto capitolo viene sottolineato il ruolo del turismo russo nell'economia georgiana, di come la Russia sia tra i principali paesi esportatori di turismo in Georgia e viene evidenziato come la situazione di tensione tra i due Paesi sia più a livello governativo che a livello di popolazione. In questa parte viene anche brevemente descritto il blocco dei voli russi attuato da Putin verso la Georgia. Questa parte di elaborato fa

maggiormente uso di dati e statistiche per descrivere l'impatto di questo settore in Georgia.

Il sesto e ultimo capitolo illustra, invece, come la situazione di tensione sia peggiorata con le proteste antirusse del 2019, e narra brevemente i fatti accaduti durante le ultime elezioni parlamentari georgiane del 2020 vinte nuovamente da Georgian Dream, ipotizzando quali scenari ci si possa aspettare nel futuro prossimo nelle relazioni tra Georgia e Russia. Viene indicato come il numero di partiti, grazie all'abbassamento della soglia di sbarramento, sia aumentato in parlamento, creando un'assemblea più eterogenea di idee. Il capitolo si conclude illustrando le proteste dell'opposizione, avvenute ancora una volta dopo il voto, e il ruolo che la pandemia di Coronavirus ha avuto nelle elezioni.

Nel sesto capitolo è inoltre presente una breve digressione sul recente conflitto avvenuto tra Armenia ed Azerbaijan, conclusosi con un accordo di pace mediato dal presidente russo Vladimir Putin. Viene sottolineato come la situazione nel Nagorno Karabakh sia da tenere sotto stretta osservazione, perché le conseguenze possono direttamente influenzare ciò che accade nei territori separatisti georgiani. Inoltre, è evidenziato come il dispiegamento di forze di pace russe nel territorio, aumenti e affermi la Russia come attore principale nella regione, anche se sfidata da una crescente influenza turca. L'Iran, il terzo grande attore regionale, ha invece perso influenza nell'area nell'ultimo periodo, scontrandosi diplomaticamente con entrambe le altre potenze regionali. La situazione non è comunque da sottovalutare siccome tutti e tre gli stati possono esercitare in ambito economico, politico, energetico o sociale una notevole influenza sulla Georgia.

Questa analisi è importante non solo per capire le dinamiche che hanno portato a questa situazione di tensione nella regione, ma è anche importante per capire altri significativi argomenti correlati ad essa:

- I. la costruzione di nuovi corridoi energetici e la sicurezza energetica della regione, importante sia per lo sviluppo stesso dei Paesi a sud del Caucaso, sia per l'Europa, che in questo modo può diversificare i suoi approvvigionamenti di risorse, evitando il monopolio russo;
- II. le politiche di vicinato e sviluppo rurale dell'Unione Europea, attive in tutti e tre gli Stati a sud del Caucaso;

III. gli interessi della NATO e degli USA nella regione. Essendo la Georgia l'unica democrazia stabile nell'area, essa viene vista come un baluardo per diffondere i valori di libertà, uguaglianza e democrazia.

A causa della limitata disponibilità di fonti sull'argomento e della difficoltà a reperire fonti imparziali, non solo riguardanti la parte russa e georgiana, ma anche osseta e abkhaza, terminare quest'opera si è rivelato impegnativo. Per quanto incompleto e lacunoso possa essere il risultato ottenuto, sono convinto che quello che sono riuscito a mettere insieme in questi mesi di lavoro sia una buona guida per chiunque decida di intraprendere lo studio di un'area complessa come il Caucaso.

PREFACE

Georgia is a small country inhabited by roughly 3.980.000 people and located in the south of the Greater Caucasus Range. It is a territory situated on a little strip of land, in between The Black Sea and The Caspian Sea, and surrounded by big nations such as, above all, Russia, which has a great influence on the so-called Transcaucasia¹.

Georgia, except few moments in history, has always had a problematic relation with its northern neighbour, especially from when it became part of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 19th century. There were periods of détente between the two countries, but most of the time situation was tense and, in some cases, even bloody.

It is undeniable that nowadays Georgia is a key area in the international arena, not only because of its proximity to the Middle East, but also because of its proximity to Russia and Azerbaijan, very important oil and gas exporters. Russia, the US and the EU are all trying to gain influence in the country, and this could cause in the future, as it already happened, an uneasy situation.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse, from an external point of view, the recent history of the relationships between these two nations, starting from the 2008 war until the late uprisings happened in Georgia in 2019, against Russian government. After a brief introduction of the area where Georgia is located, and a concise description of the conflict, the dissertation will focus on the main events that took place after it, in order to create a framework for the reader of how ties between the two political entities developed year by year. The detailed analysis of the events starting from 2008 this work will provide, may give you new points for reflection on how this situation can be solved.

I chose this topic mainly because I spent six months in Georgia, doing the Erasmus Overseas Programme, which gave me the possibility to discover an amazing country and the people who live there, and which allowed me to experience first-hand what happens there, and to listen reports about the conflict from people who have experienced it and how situation is still tense today. Moreover, I am really interested in this matter because it is a field in which I would like to work, therefore peacebuilding projects, conflicts

¹ Transcaucasia is a synonym of South Caucasus, mainly used during URSS period, which includes Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

resolution and monitoring missions in key areas. Since Georgia, even if drew attention in the international geopolitical stage lately is still almost unknown, I found appropriate and useful to write a short introduction with the main features about the area where it is located, and why is it so nowadays.

My research is based on books of well-known authors who are experts of the Caucasus region such as Svante C., De Waal T., Asmus R., Coene F., Ferrari A. In addition, I used scientific magazine articles, government websites and information from Ministries of Foreign Affairs, International Institutes for Strategic Studies, ISPI², Chatham House, Carnegie, Russian Council and GISS³, among other. Furthermore, I will include data and information I discovered by myself during my semester there.

² Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale.

³ Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies.

INTRODUCTION

Before starting, I would like to make some things clear about the terms I will use. Since Moscow rejects the word “occupation” as concern the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, when I write “the occupied territories” I am using the Georgian point of view. Moscow argues that it has not the effective control on these areas, hence the term “occupation” is used improperly. Moreover, this expression shifts the attention away from the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts which exist and offer a different perspective in which we see just the struggle between Russia and Georgia.

The main issue in the two inter-state conflicts is that, in Tbilisi’s view, Russia is the leading manipulator; this point of view hinders the real understanding of events, blocking the possibility of reaching a peace agreement. Furthermore, by defining the strife as a “Russian matter”, Tbilisi shows indifference to the interests of Abkhazia and South Ossetia⁴.

Georgia is a small country of 69.700 sq. km⁵, with an estimated population of 3.989.000 (2020)⁶. It is part of the Caucasus region which, currently, is one of the most strategically important area worldwide. However, it is important to remember that the Caucasus is one of the most complex area in the world for what concern languages, culture, and ethnicity. It has always been not only a geographical border, but also an historic-cultural border between two distinct worlds: The Middle East, with its complex culture, and The Eurasian Steppe, with its nomadic people. Hence, pushed both from south and north by the several invasions, defeated people found shelter in the impervious Caucasus Range, creating a melting-pot of traditions, cultures, languages and ethnicity too complex to establish a unitary state, and to be unified by an external power⁷.

Only the Russian conquest at the end of the 18th century, was able to create a unitary political space in the Caucasus, at least until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Even today, this area is seen as a border between Europe and Asia, between Islam and

⁴ Silaev, N., & Sushentsov, A. (2014). Russia's View of Its Relations with Georgia after the 2012 Elections: Implications for Regional Stability. *Connections*, 14(1), 65-86. Retrieved September 5, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26326386>.

⁵ Available at: <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia>.

⁶ Data available at: <http://srv1.worldometers.info/world-population/georgia-population/>.

⁷ Ferrari, A. *Introduzione, Breve storia del Caucaso*, Roma, Carocci (2007), p. 11-19.

Christianity, a fragmented and complicated boundary. In the past, Arabs were impressed by the linguistic diversity of the Caucasus too, so much to call it “*jabal al-alsun*”, namely “Mountain of languages”⁸.

The Caucasus is divided into North and South Caucasus. The North Caucasus includes seven Russian Federal Districts which are Stavropol Krai, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkess, North Ossetia-Alania, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. The South Caucasus is divided, instead, in three independent nations: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. These three countries are quite similar in the way of life, though there are many differences between them. The main religion in these countries has still influence over the political field and it is different in each republic: Eastern Orthodoxy in Georgia, Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia, and Islam in Azerbaijan.

Languages in the South Caucasus are unique, and are famous for their complexity, although Georgian and Udi are the only ones with an ancient literary tradition. Russian is spoken by almost everyone living in the region too, since it was imposed in school and for administrative purposes.

The Transcaucasia was and still is an unstable area, an area where conflicts are common occurrence. In the past, many empires and political entities tried to conquer it, from the Persian Empire to the Arab Caliphates, from Russian Empire to the Ottoman Empire, concluding with the USSR among other⁹. Nowadays, we can find two delicate situations: the one in Nagorno Karabakh, today renamed Artsakh in Armenian, between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the struggle between Georgia and Russia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Nagorno Karabakh war had an important role in influencing other people self-determination and autonomy demands, which caused uprisings in Georgia provinces and Transnistria, a de facto autonomous State inside Moldova, but unrecognized at international level. But why the area is still unstable? In the first place, there is the so-called “frozen conflict” in Artsakh, because Armenia is occupying seven provinces of Azerbaijan too; a ceasefire is still in place despite the fact that tens of people, both civilian and military, die every year along the border because of snipers or abuse of power from the army of both sides. While this thesis is written, the conflict has reignited,

⁸ Ferrari, A. Introduzione. Breve storia del Caucaso, Roma, Carocci (2007), p. 16.

⁹ Ibid. 7

leading to the death of roughly 5,000 soldiers in total. Moscow eventually managed to find a peace, signed on November 10th, 2020.

Moreover, the situation between Russia and Georgia is still tense: Russia is occupying 20% of the Georgian territory and the border is heavily militarized. The recent war between the two countries in 2008, reminded the world that this part of the globe remains a potential source of wars in the twenty-first century. The astonishing diversity, coupled with the USSR legacy of forced boundaries and internally displaced people, has made the Caucasus vulnerable to internal tensions and outside interferences.

Today the Caucasus is one the most important and delicate area, because it has the power to spark a conflict between the bigger nations which borders it. Its increasing importance as a producer of, as well as a transit route for oil and gas, add another element to the historic great power rivalry and local ethnic tension. Tensions in this area will have consequences far beyond the borders of the states concerned.

The Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia was founded on 25th February 1921, after Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1920, when the Soviet Red Army managed to put the Caucasus under its control, and during the following years many autonomies were created (for instance South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh). These three new republics were supposed to be independent from Moscow, but they were not: they were occupied by the Russian army and every decision was taken by Moscow. In 1922, the three republics united in the Federative Union of Soviet Socialist Republics of Transcaucasia, later called Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. The Federation will disband in 1936, when the three Soviets attained the status of union republics¹⁰.

In the attempt of creating a “Soviet nation”, Russia used a strategy called “Russification”, which was usually very brutal and abusive in the Caucasus: old schoolbooks were destroyed, and schools were forced to teach in Russian. Historical facts were distorted and falsified in order to create the impression of centuries-long friendly relations between Russians and the Caucasian nations. In addition, in order to create a

¹⁰ Waal, T. D. (2010). The Soviet Caucasus. In *Caucasus: An Introduction* (pp. 71-97). Oxford University Press.

Soviet nation, thousands of people were deported or imprisoned because of their wealth level, anti-communist ideas, treason, spying or with the fake charge to be an agent of a West power¹¹.

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev came into power and started the famous programmes Glasnost and Perestroika, a number of economic and political policies which should have reformed USSR. However, these policies allowed a greater freedom of speech, self-determination of peoples and multi-candidate elections. It gave the possibility to nationalists and pro-independence movements in non-Russian entities of the Soviet Union, to rise against the regime. The situation became unmanageable until 1991 when the Soviet Union will fall, and 15 new States were born. The Republic of Georgia will declare independence on the 9th April.

Although people in the Caucasus were happy to be independent, they soon realized that they had to face the Soviet legacy, namely the “*Russian divide and rule policy*”. The socio-economic situation was very bad: the deep economic crisis in the ex-soviet republics was exacerbated by inter-ethnic conflicts, especially in the Caucasus, where some ethnic groups were split, others received a kind of autonomy and yet others were deported¹². The Soviet Union collapsed leaving a cluster of peoples free to pursue their desire to be independent, creating an explosive situation.

As aforementioned, this work will focus on how the relationships between Russia and Georgia developed after the 2008 war. The first chapter briefly describes the war which took place on August 2008, why it was a little but relevant conflict and the role that European actors had toward the path to reach a ceasefire. It is highlighted, for both sides, the wrong choices that has been made and which caused the outbreak of the war, and why both countries are to blame: not only the unpleasant Russian actions which increased tension, but also the reckless Georgian conducts culminated with the shelling of the South Ossetia capital city Tskhinvali. Moreover, the first chapter describes in an accurate manner the ceasefire agreement mediated by France, then speaker of the

¹¹ Ibid. 10

¹² Geukjian, O. (2012). The impact of Soviet structures and policies. In *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh and the Legacy of Soviet Nationalities Policy* (pp. 79-104). Ashgate: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

European Union, and how this agreement was just a partial victory, because it underlined EU's weaknesses outside EU's territory as well as a conflicts mediator. Yet, emphasis is put on why this small and unknown war opened the world to a new type of warfare, introducing for the first time in history, besides air and ground troops, cybernetic attacks to specific facilities.

In the second chapter it is illustrated the so-called "borderization", the Russian strategy which slowly move the border within Georgian territory, and the implications it has towards population and the energy security of the area. Additionally, two key cases are discussed: the one of Archil Tatumashvili and the one of Zaza Gakheladze, which tell how harsh conditions are for Georgian people living close to the border. In the chapter, the reader will find many statements and point of views from all parties involved, such as allegations from the occupied territories governments, Russian government, Georgian government as well as international actors like the US. The chapter ends with an insight on why this phenomenon of borderization is so dangerous for energy security, focusing on the Baku-Supsa Pipeline.

The third chapter is a picture of the internal situation in the two separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, pinpointing the relations they have with Georgia and Russia, and how the latter's aids are essential for their survival. It is emphasized how Russia immediately bound the two regions to itself with cooperation pacts, both in the economic and military field, explained by data and statistics. It is also included an explanation of why a dialogue possibility exists between Georgia and the separatist regions.

The fourth chapter spell out the turning role that Georgian Parliamentary elections had in 2012, 2016 and the Presidential elections in 2018; it demonstrates how the fall of Saakashvili and, consequently, the rise of Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream have brought new hope of a dialogue between Moscow and Tbilisi. The 2012's elections have enshrined the fall of Saakashvili, hated by the Russian government, making it possible for a period of relaxation in the relations between the countries, promoting tourism and trade. In addition, these elections are important also because it was the first time that, in an ex USSR republic, government was elected throughout a vote and not through protests.

The chapter ends with the 2018 Presidential elections in Georgia, won by the candidate of Georgian Dream Salome Zurbishvili and the consequences which has resulted.

The fifth chapter shows the role of Russian tourism within Georgian economy, it shows that Russia provides many tourists to Georgia and explains that strain between the countries is more at a government level than at a population level. In this chapter it is described the flights blockade made by President Putin towards Georgia.

In the last chapter it is illustrated how tension increased after the 2019 anti-russian protests, and what are the possible future scenarios in the relations between Moscow and Tbilisi after the 2020 Georgian Parliamentary elections won, again, by Georgian Dream. It is outlined the increased number of parties in Georgian Parliament due to the reform of the electoral system. The chapter comes to an end analysing opposition upheaval occurred after the elections, and the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in the election process. In this last chapter it is also present a short digression on the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, ended up with a peace mediated by the Russian President Vladimir Putin. It is pointed out that situation in the Nagorno Karabakh region must be kept under strict observation, since it could have direct consequences in Georgian occupied regions.

Understanding Russo-Georgian ties is essential to solve the situation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as other separatist regions existing in countries of the former USSR. Only in this way the portrait of a peaceful Caucasus region will become less blurred.

CHAPTER 1

THE AUGUST WAR AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

1.1 - THE BATTLEGROUND

The August war, which lasted from the 7th to the 12th of August 2008, was a small clash that had important consequences worldwide because of the interests at stake, which will be later explained. Moscow deployed a total of 40,000 forces during these days, half in Abkhazia and half in South Ossetia¹³. We will focus on the latter, therefore events happened in South Ossetia. Georgian troops were way less numerous than Russian troops, roughly 1/3 of Russian armed forces deployed, and unprepared for a conflict against a big nation such as Russia. The modernization of military infrastructures in South Ossetia area, coupled with the delivery of weapons to both Russian and separatist forces, suggested an invasion planned well in advance. Moreover, as Ronald Asmus point out in his book “*A little war that shook the world*” (p. 165):

“Russia deployed a force whose size and capability far exceeded anything needed to come to the support of endangered Russian peacekeepers or to pacify a small separatist province. It was a force that had been assembled over a long period of time for a different purpose”.

Since Georgia is separated from Russia by the Great Caucasus range, there are only few points where armies can cross it. The main ways close to South Ossetia are the Georgian military road, which runs from Tbilisi to Vladikavkaz, and the Roki Tunnel. The Roki Tunnel is a facility built by the Soviet government in 1984, and it had a key role in the conflict.

¹³ Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 165.



1.2 – WHY AUGUST WAR IS AN IMPORTANT CASE STUDY

A noteworthy feature of this war is that it was the first time in history that a conflict was battled both on the ground and the internet. The aggression by the Russian army was accompanied by a cyber-attack on many Georgian websites, including government ones¹⁴. This is the first reason why this small conflict is so important: it changed the art of war. The use of technology and the so-called “fourth-front”¹⁵ from now on, will have a crucial role in warfare.

The other reasons why this clash is worth studying is because it involved many actors, it had a difficult and uncertain ceasefire process, and the world was on the brink of another world war. As already mentioned, there were many parties involved: many countries and international organizations that had, and still have nowadays, serious

¹⁴ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. Available at: https://www.mpil.de/files/pdf4/IIFFMCG_Volume_III.pdf, p. 217.

¹⁵ Term used to describe attacks in cyberspace during a war, after ground, air and sea front.

interests at stake. In the first place there is Russia, that wants its sphere of influence¹⁶ in order to regain a status of superpower, and Georgia was an important part of it.

During 2008, Russia was upset by many events:

- Western countries recognition of Kosovo independence¹⁷;
- the will of Western countries not to let Russia regain influence in ex-soviet countries¹⁸;
- Ukraine and Georgia asked to join the NATO Membership Action Plan¹⁹;
- the US wanted to deploy NATO missile defences in Poland and Czech Republic²⁰;
- Saakashvili²¹ attitude towards Russia.

Therefore, all things considered, Georgia invasion could be seen as an act to punish Western countries²², to prevent Georgia from joining NATO²³ and an action of the Russian government to punish Georgia's president Saakashvili²⁴, whose relations with Russia were constantly worsening.

Georgia's objective was to defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty, and values such as peace and democracy, given that Georgia is one the few democracies in the Middle East/ Central Asia area. Therefore, Georgia is becoming more and more important for Western countries.

The US also had interests at stake: it wanted to prevent Russia from gaining influence in the area, but at the same time it wanted to avoid a direct confrontation with

¹⁶ Former Soviet space minus the Baltic States which are already in NATO organization.

¹⁷ Asmus, R. D. (2010). Chapter 3 - The Kosovo precedent. In *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁸ Cornell, S. E., Popjanevski, J., & Nilsson, N. (2008). In *Russia's war in Georgia: Causes and implications for Georgia and the world*. Nacka: Silk Road Studies Program, p. 4.

¹⁹ Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 111-117.

²⁰ Gardner, H. (2013). Chapter 4 - Ramifications of the August 2008 Georgia-Russia War (p. 95). In *NATO expansion and US strategy in Asia: Surmounting the global crisis*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

²¹ Former Georgian president from 2004 to 2013.

²² Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 6.

²³ Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 139.

²⁴ Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 166-167, 199.

Russia and a Caucasus Cold War. For the US, Georgia is an important base in the fight against terrorism since 2001 too²⁵, and it has many military and economic agreements with it²⁶.

Last but not the least, the EU. The EU had a key role in the process of ceasefire and had crucial interests on the table. First, the EU did not want a new Cold War too and issues relative to the occupation of Georgia, since it would have shown that the organization was weak, and there was a bad management of EU external policies. In this case the external policies were about the protection of energy security, that is how to deal with third countries to guarantee the access and the transport of energy resources, and this includes working on the stability of these third countries, such as Georgia²⁷. Second, it wanted to avoid the entire occupation of Georgia, which is a sovereign state, because it would have lasted years and years, and because this small confrontation could have spread more conflicts not only in an unstable area such as the Caucasus or Middle East, but also in Europe: consequences on refugees, internally displaced people and criminal activities would have been huge. Third, the EU supports Georgia (and Ukraine), since they are two democratic countries in a part of the world where there is a big lack in democracy, therefore it was important to support values such as democracy, the right of self-determination and collective security. However, the situation is way more complex: the challenge for the EU is how to support Georgia without compromising good neighbourly relations with Russia²⁸.

Finally, it is important to understand the point of view of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The former is seeking to become part of Russia and, in doing so, reunite with

²⁵ *Dopo la guerra russo-georgiana. Il Caucaso in una prospettiva europea*, p. 60. Retrieved June 23, 2020, from [http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Il%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Il%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20(1).pdf)

²⁶ *Dopo la guerra russo-georgiana. Il Caucaso in una prospettiva europea*, p. 56. Retrieved June 23, 2020, from [http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Il%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Il%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20(1).pdf)

²⁷ *Dopo la guerra russo-georgiana. Il Caucaso in una prospettiva europea*, p. 12-13. Retrieved June 23, 2020, from [http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Il%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Il%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20(1).pdf)

²⁸ *Dopo la guerra russo-georgiana. Il Caucaso in una prospettiva europea*, p. 153. Retrieved June 23, 2020, from [https://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Il%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Il%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20(1).pdf)

North Ossetia since after the dissolution of the USSR, this region wanted to remain part of it, and not to join the Republic of Georgia. In 1991 this action led to a civil war between South Ossetian and Georgian until 1992, when a Joint Peacekeeping Force consisting of three battalions from Russia, Georgia and Ossetia respectively was deployed in the area. Since then, South Ossetia obtained the status of independent and sovereign state and tensions with Georgia kept escalating, especially from 2004 when Saakashvili with his agenda to fully integrate Ossetia to Georgia took power²⁹.

Abkhazia refuses all offers of a large degree of autonomy and wants only full independence. Georgia, for its part, has indicated that the use of force has not been ruled out if diplomacy and political talks do not bring about a favourable outcome, but such a scenario seems less likely since the events of August 2008³⁰. Situation was tense long before 2008, especially in Kodori Valley, where there were nonstop provocations from the Georgian side, even if Abkhaz tried multiple times to find a peaceful and diplomatic solution³¹.

To resume, it is essential to understand the scale of this conflict because of the so many powerful actors involved, each of them with multiple objectives, and the significant consequences that it had, and still has, in the entire globe.

1.3 – THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR

Georgian army started shelling Tskhinvali³² the night of 7 to 8 August, marking the beginning of a large-scale conflict. However, this action was only the apex of a

²⁹ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. Available at: https://www.mpil.de/files/pdf4/IIFFMCG_Volume_III.pdf, p. 191-195.

³⁰ Coene, F. (2011). *The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In Caucasus: An introduction*. London: Taylor & Francis, p. 148.

³¹ *Dopo la guerra russo-georgiana. Il Caucaso in una prospettiva europea*, p. 197. Retrieved June 23, 2020, from [http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/II%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/II%20Caucaso%20in%20una%20prospettiva%20europea%20(1).pdf)

³² The de-facto capital city of South Ossetia.

protracted period of increasing incidents, skirmishes, provocations and tensions³³. The conflict escalated quickly from an intrastate conflict to an interstate war.

At 11.35 pm the first explosions were heard in Tskhinvali, and at 11.50 pm missiles and bombs began to rain down across the city. Even though many civilians had been evacuated, several thousand people remained, trying to find shelter in the basements of the buildings. The bombardment continued almost all the night, and at half past six in the morning Georgian armed forces and tanks started a ground attack, pushing back South Ossetian militia, who was outnumbered. Georgian were optimistic, considering that already at ten in the morning Georgian troops occupied eleven villages and most of the capital of South Ossetia.

Nevertheless, Russian peacekeepers forces in the area reported twelve casualties³⁴, and by four o'clock in the afternoon the first Russian tank, coming through the Roki Tunnel, entered the city. For two days Georgians tried to hold the capital, until the 10th of August, when eventually they were exhausted and outvoted. They had to retreat, chased by Russian army, bringing the war into Georgia proper.



Simultaneously with the battle of Tskhinvali, Russia began bombing key military infrastructures across all Georgia and the town of Gori killing 60 people and opened a new

³³ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, p. 10. Available at: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf.

³⁴ In 1992, on the basis of the Agreement on the Basic Principles for Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict, signed by the heads of Russia, Georgia, North and South Ossetia, Russian peacekeepers joined in the countering zone the Mixed Peacekeeping Forces, which also included, on a parity basis, the two national battalions, which represented the Ossetian and Georgian sides. The successful experience of the peacekeeping operation, led by the current Russian Defence Minister General of the Army Sergei Shoigu, was subsequently used in settling other conflicts. As for its effectiveness, that operation is considered to be one of the most successful peacekeeping missions in the world. As a result, tens of thousands of families returned to peaceful life. Russian peacekeepers stopped the bloodshed, preventing the development of a humanitarian catastrophe and the death of civilians. Available at: http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12133260@egNews

front in Abkhazia³⁵. On August 9, Putin flew from Beijing Olympic Games to Vladikavkaz to take charge of the operations, clarifying it was he and not President Medvedev who was pulling the strings.

On August 11, Georgian troops were forced to leave Gori and set up defensive positions south, in a last stand to defend Tbilisi from Russia invasion. Russian forces stopped on the road to Tbilisi, not risking a direct confrontation with the core of Georgian army and a large-scale international reaction³⁶.

1.4 – SARKOZY AND THE EU-MEDIATED CEASEFIRE

The US realized that without a strong American response, Georgia could have been crushed in few days, so it settled some key points:

1. To stop the war as soon as possible in order to keep Russian territory gain limited;
2. To avoid the fall of the democratically elected president Saakashvili;
3. To point out to Moscow that there will be a price to pay and it was not worthy³⁷.

Nonetheless, at the same time, Washington did not want to act alone for the fear that this crisis may turn into a new Cold War or even in a direct military confrontation with Moscow. Hence, President George W. Bush encouraged its European allies to step in and take the lead of the negotiation, whereas the US would have just stayed in the back.

During those months France was chairman of the EU, and Sarkozy decided to take the reins on the crisis. The French president was looking for an opportunity to put France, the European Union, and, above all, himself on the world stage. It was a strange situation because it was the first time the EU mediated in a conflict, and it was fortunate that France was in the lead³⁸, because it had good relations with Russia³⁹.

³⁵ Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 180.

³⁶ De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010, NY, p. 215.

³⁷ Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 177.

³⁸ GlobalSecurity.org, available at: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/fr-forrel-ru.htm>.

³⁹ *Enter Sarkozy the peacemaker*, Tran M., 08/12/2008. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/12/georgia.russia4>. Accessed on: 06/23/2020.

It is important to underline how the conflict was represented by the media too: they were all saying, “Russia is invading South Ossetia”, which was part of a democratic state, but nobody was saying “Georgia is attacking South Ossetia”. Western reactions were shaped by media broadcasting only images about Russian’s bombing of Gori, and not Georgian’s bombing of Tskhinvali: Western governments did not condemn explicitly the Georgian attack but they, on the contrary, harshly denounced Russia’s behaviour⁴⁰.

The bargaining process was not easy, but at the end an agreement was reached, even if with some uncertainties as a result of vague considerations. The ceasefire included six points:

1. Do not resort to the use of force;
2. The absolute cessation of all hostilities;
3. Free access to humanitarian assistance;
4. The armed forces of Georgia must withdraw to their permanent positions;
5. The armed forces of the Russian Federation must withdraw to the line where they were stationed prior to the beginning of the hostilities; prior to the establishment of international mechanisms the Russian peacekeeping forces will take additional security measures;
6. An international debate on the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and ways to ensure their lasting security will take place⁴¹.

The problem with this ceasefire agreement is that was poorly written, hence open to many interpretations. On the one hand, the EU, and especially France, was seeking to end the war as soon as possible, without focusing on Georgian interest and integrity, for the reason that every day could have been the end of the Republic of Georgia with the Russian army 50 km away from Tbilisi; on the other hand, this negotiation was a victory for Russia, since Medvedev was able to avoid mentioning Georgia’s independence and territorial integrity⁴².

⁴⁰ De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010, NY, p. 213.

⁴¹ In *Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council, 2008-2009 - 19 August 2008: signing of the six-principle ceasefire agreement*. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/sc/repertoire/2008-2009/Part%20I/Europe/08-09_Georgia.pdf. Accessed on 23 June 2020.

⁴² Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 201-202.

Sarkozy left Moscow satisfied, he and his team managed to save Georgia, to maintain Europe's good relations with Russia and they showed the entire world that the European Union could manage such a complex crisis under French leadership at the border of Europe. However, not everybody was sure it was a success. When they read the text, American Officials were shocked: the text was too nebulous, opened to various interpretations and without specific dates and location of the ceasefire. In addition, it was not specified which "security measures" would have been implemented and when the future status of the two regions would have been examined⁴³.

In this way, the ceasefire let many doors opened that Russia could exploited. Georgia was disappointed because it was invaded after many unpleasant actions⁴⁴ by Russia during the previous months⁴⁵, and the West had done so little to help. The consequences of this ceasefire are still lasting today, with Russian troops abuses (of which will be discussed in the next chapter) along the border and a tense situation felt everywhere in Georgia.

From Tbilisi's perspective, as Ronald Asmus writes in his book "*A little war that shook the world*" at page 204, "*Georgia has just been invaded after a long series of aggressive Russian steps against which the West has done so little*". So, all things considered, Russia played it strategically and it came out as a winner, whereas Georgia was defeated, and criticized the EU and France for not having done enough.

In the end, most of the points of the arrangement were not respected. The access to EU monitoring missions in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia was denied by Moscow; Russian troops withdrew as required from the two territories but not at the point where Russian peacekeepers were before the conflict burst; there was an international debate about the future of the two regions but without a real conclusion. Furthermore, on August 26, Russia formally recognized the independence of both territories, claiming it was

⁴³ Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 202-203.

⁴⁴ Military exercises on the border, the build-up of a strong military force on the border, lively discussions between Prime Minister Putin and Georgian President Saakashvili, the modernization of military and transport infrastructures along the Georgian border (sign that something was happening), the "implicit" continuous support to South Ossetia and Abkhazia independence, passportization strategy.

⁴⁵ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. Available at: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf

defending them from Georgian “genocide”⁴⁶. With regard to the international community, only Nicaragua and Venezuela recognized them. To consolidate its power in the two areas, “Moscow launched a massive economic reconstruction program for their territories, opened new transport routes to Russia, and dispatched new troops, legitimized under bilateral military agreements”⁴⁷.

1.5 - POSTWAR GEORGIA

Even though it was just a five days conflict, the 2008 August war had disastrous implications not only in Georgia, but in the entire Caucasus, and the consequences are still felt nowadays. At the end of the clash between Russia and Georgia 850 people died, and several thousands were wounded. Almost half of the deaths were civilians. The worst outcome of the war is, without any doubt, what concerns refugees: about 138,000 fled their homes, of whom 100,000 were able to return over the next two months. That left almost forty thousand Georgian refugees still displaced in late 2009⁴⁸.

After the war Georgian economy was devastated, not only because of Russians’ bombing of infrastructures, but also because foreign investments fell suddenly. As aforementioned, the war had important consequences on Georgia’s neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan. The destruction of Grakali railroad bridge in Georgia costed Armenia half a billion dollars, as imports from the Black Sea were halted for a week. Moreover, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and other Azerbaijan’s energy pipelines through Georgia were shut down, losing Azerbaijan huge amount of revenues⁴⁹.

The European Union established the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia in order to find who to blame for beginning the war, hence who fired first and who started to plan the war. On September 30, 2009, a report was published, saying that “The shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed

⁴⁶ Asmus, R. D. (2010). *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia, and the future of the West*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 211.

⁴⁷ De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010, NY, p. 215.

⁴⁸ De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010, NY, p. 217.

⁴⁹ De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010, NY, p. 218.

conflict in Georgia, despite the fact that it was only the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, provocations and incidents”⁵⁰.

In a broader sense, the war was the culmination of several years of bad politics in the Caucasus. The Russian strategy is easier to understand: they simply exploited all opportunities to maximize their presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This was consistent with Moscow’s foreign policy⁵¹ to reassert a sphere of influence across the former Soviet Union and block the ambitions of any neighbours to join NATO, which is still seen as a hostile alliance⁵². The two breakaway territories were less important in themselves than as an instrument of influence against Georgia and the West⁵³.

The real loser in this conflict was the West, which couldn’t stop Russia to achieve its objectives, a West that promised more than what it could really do.

At this point, I would like to insert a reflection on why the West has the right to intervene in Caucasus affairs, especially in Georgia. First, Georgia is part of the Council of Europe, which should not be confused with the European Union, even though it is strictly linked with many European conventions and committees, hence Georgia has numerous ties with European countries⁵⁴. Additionally, after the fall of the USSR, Georgia has turned its gaze to the West, demanding to join NATO⁵⁵ and developing in the latest years the desire to join the European Union⁵⁶, in an attempt to get away from Russia’s influence. Another reason why the West has the incentive to interfere in the Caucasus region is because of oil and energy supply. There are multiple pipelines coming from Azerbaijan crossing Georgia, which means for Europe to make energy more affordable,

⁵⁰ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, p. 10. Available at: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf.

⁵¹ Penkova, T. *Russia’s attitude towards the post-Soviet space after the war in Georgia*, ISPI, available at: https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/pb_111_2008.pdf, p.1.

⁵² As President Medvedev wrote in the Financial Times and said in a conference (27 August and 31 August respectively), he justified his decision by digging up the history of the region and those people’s desire to be independent. Another point is that Russia’s foreign policy is to protect Russian citizens “wherever they may be”, point that could explain the passportization. Further, rationalising Georgia’s invasion he said: “Russia, like other countries in the world, has regions where it has privileged interests. These are regions where countries with which we have friendly relations are located.”

⁵³ De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010, NY, p. 222.

⁵⁴ Council of Europe, available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/georgia>.

⁵⁵ Membership Action Plan: a NATO programme of assistance/support, suited to individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance.

⁵⁶ In 2011, President Mikhail Saakashvili openly stated the desire of his country to be part of the organization, emphasising what Georgian Deputy Prime Minister said one year earlier.

secure and sustainable⁵⁷, and the end of Russia's energy monopoly in Europe⁵⁸. Therefore, generally speaking, a safe Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan and Georgia, is of crucial importance for Europe⁵⁹. Furthermore, one of the objectives of the European Union is to have safe borders, which means that the EU tries, with external policies, to create stable neighbouring countries: consequently, Georgia is one of those countries⁶⁰.

Broader speaking about the West, also the US has relevant interests in the Caucasus and particularly Georgia. The US wants to preserve the stability of the region and the resurgence of frozen conflicts; it also supports democratic change and better governance, as well as the international integration of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the world order. Finally, the South Caucasus is a well of energy resources, economically important worldwide. Many economic aids were sent to all the three republics from the US after the dissolution of the USSR, when these new entities appear out of nowhere: Bush senior administration was caught unprepared on how to deal and what to do in the South Caucasus region, since it was a completely new area to US foreign policy⁶¹. The war in 2008, however, has made US approach in the region more cautious,



⁵⁷ Paul, A. & Rzayeva, G. *Azerbaijan – The key to EU energy security*, European Policy Center, available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/135284/pub_1357_azerbaijan_-_the_key_to_eu_energy_security.pdf.

⁵⁸ Chyong, C. & Tcherneva, V. *Europe's vulnerability on Russian gas*, European Council on Foreign Relations, available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_europes_vulnerability_on_russian_gas.

⁵⁹ European Commission, *European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations*, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/georgia_en.

⁶⁰ Information on EU Neighbouring Policies available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/european-neighbourhood-policy_en.

⁶¹ Rumer, E., Sokolsky, R., Stronski, P. *U.S. Policy Toward the South Caucasus: Take Three*,

to avoid the risk of a worsening in the relations with Russia or a direct confrontation with it there.

On the other side Moscow played it strategically, playing on Abkhaz and Ossetian insecurities and Western hesitations, especially from the US, which gave confusing signals: Bush support for Saakashvili and US troops in Georgia to train Georgian forces for peacekeeping and antiterrorism operations. Many observers, especially Georgians, forgot US were there for another purpose and not to combat against Abkhazia or South Ossetia. It is important to underline that people who suffered more from this interstate conflict were Georgians and Ossetians ordinary citizens. People living there had good relations until the beginning of the fight: Georgians were working in South Ossetia, there were mixed marriages and shared businesses. In December 2008, a Georgian villager named Zakharia complained that he missed his Ossetian friends and trading partners. “I don’t know who was right and who was wrong, but this didn’t need to happen,” he said. If had been up to these villagers, there would have never been a Georgian-Ossetian conflict. They were not to blame, but it was they who suffered the most⁶².

To acquire better understanding of the situation between South Ossetia and Georgia, I will briefly describe the events. Since the birth of USSR, the Ossetians were split between Russia and Georgia in two parts, the North Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the South Ossetia Autonomous Oblast. In South Ossetia there were roughly 65,000 ethnic Ossetian out of a population of 98,000, whereas almost 100,000 Ossetian were distributed throughout Georgia⁶³. Secessionist campaigns in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were revived during the national revitalization movement at the end of the 1980s when the renewed upsurge of Georgian nationalism during Mikhail Gorbachev’s era of perestroika increased inter-ethnic tensions within the Soviet republic, as manifold national groups were permitted free expression throughout the USSR, and the manipulation of ethnic affiliation became a key dynamic in political life⁶⁴. When Zviad Gamsakhurdia became leader of the Georgian Supreme Soviet in 1990, tensions escalated

Carnegie Endowment, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/31/u.s.-policy-toward-south-caucasus-take-three-pub-70122>. Accessed on July 7th, 2020.

⁶² De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010, NY, p. 224.

⁶³ Cornell, S. E. (2005). Georgia: From unitary dreams to an asymmetric federation? In *Small nations and great powers: A study of ethnopolitical conflict in the Caucasus*. London: Routledge Curzon, p. 153.

⁶⁴ German, T. *Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Collision of Georgian and Russian Interests*, IFRI, available at: <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/germananglais.pdf>. Retrieved July 06, 2020.

quickly because of his strong support for the rights of the Georgians, with the slogan “Georgia for Georgians”. Later, Gamsakhurdia deprived South Ossetia of its state of autonomy and imposed a state of emergency, escalating Ossetians demands for reunification with North Ossetia into full-scale violence. Armed skirmishes broke out, leading to full-scale war in the spring of 1991. The prospect of a localized conflict spreading, together with the election of Eduard Shevardnadze as Georgian president in March 1992, encouraged the two sides to seek a more conciliatory stance, and on June 24, 1992, the Dagomys peace agreement was signed, prompting the deployment within the conflict zone of a Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) that comprised “national” battalions from Georgia, South Ossetia, North Ossetia-Alania and Russia (500 troops from each). A quadripartite negotiating body, the Joint Control Commission (JCC), was also established to foster political reconciliation between the various sides. It included representatives from Georgia, South Ossetia, Russia, North Ossetia-Alania and the OSCE⁶⁵.

1.6 – WHO TO BLAME FOR STARTING THE WAR AND FOR THE WORSENING OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES

Tbilisi lived the months before the war under the fear of an invasion by Moscow in Abkhazia, so when tension started to increase in South Ossetia, Georgia was not prepared. Georgia feared an escalation in Abkhazia, not in South Ossetia; Saakashvili thought that Russia would have not attacked if he struck South Ossetia⁶⁶. It is undeniable that the conflict began with the shelling of Tskhinvali by Georgian army. Nevertheless, many evidences, which will be listed below, prove that Russia was prepared for an aggressive action months before August:

- Moscow’s passportization strategy⁶⁷;

⁶⁵ IFRI, available at: <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/germananglais.pdf>, p. 6-7. Retrieved July 06, 2020.

⁶⁶ De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010, NY, p. 220.

⁶⁷ Evidences taken from:

https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008_08_PP_CornellPopjanevskiNillson_Russia-Georgia.pdf.

- The subsequent introduction of paratroopers and heavy equipment into Abkhazia;
- The introduction of railway troops to rebuild the railway to Ochamchire, which served no other purpose than to facilitate the later deployment of troops from Russia into Georgia⁶⁸;
- The prediction by several analysts during spring that a war would take place in the summer⁶⁹;
- The massing of military forces and hardware near Georgia's borders (as well as likely in the Java district of South Ossetia), and the Kavkaz-2008 military exercises, which prefigured the subsequent invasion⁷⁰;
- The increase of attacks by the Russian-controlled South Ossetian forces on Georgian posts and villages on August 1-6, where Russian peacekeepers did nothing to stop⁷¹;
- The opening of a second front in Abkhazia without any provocation or pretext whatsoever⁷²;
- The rapid deployment of coordinated ground, air and naval attacks within hours of Georgia's entry into Tskhinvali, which could not have been undertaken without meticulous and long planning – especially the landing of several thousand troops and armor by sea in Abkhazia⁷³;
- The political recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while retaining firm military and political control over these territories and their leadership⁷⁴.

On the other hand, Georgia has its faults too. First, Saakashvili's military expenditure increase was a clear signal that something was going on, and it was a clear signal for Russia⁷⁵. Second, a pro-West orientation of Georgia government and an anti-

⁶⁸ Ibid. 58

⁶⁹ Ibid. 58

⁷⁰ Ibid. 58

⁷¹ Ibid. 58

⁷² Ibid. 58

⁷³ Ibid. 58

⁷⁴ Ibid. 58

⁷⁵ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, p. 14, available at: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf.

Russia attitude quickly increased tension between the two countries⁷⁶. Third, and most important, the bombing of Tskhinvali and the killing of Russian peacekeeping forces and citizens were the last straw.

Therefore, the conclusion of the EU report was that: “The Mission is not in a position to consider as sufficiently substantiated the Georgian claim concerning a large-scale Russian military incursion into South Ossetia before 8 August 2008.” The available evidences suggest that the units of Russia’s Fifty-eighth Army in North Ossetia in fact only moved after the Georgian assault had already begun. The Georgian authorities themselves agreed with this version of events on August 8 when they presented a document to the UN Security Council session saying, “at 5:30 a.m. [on August 8], the first Russian troops entered South Ossetia through the Roki Tunnel.” This timeline fits with an Ossetian radio report that recorded that Russian units were moving toward the Roki Tunnel around half-past one in the morning and with the report of a South Ossetian eyewitness in the Java region who said she saw the first small Russian armoured column at around eight o’clock in the morning on August 8—and a major Russian intervention only later in the day. It is fairly clear, then, that the Georgian side attacked first on the night of August 7–8 and that these two claims were a smokescreen put up to disguise this. The decision to attack may have been taken only a few hours earlier in a situation of near panic. Certainly, neither side was fully ready for war precisely on August 7–8. The entire Russian leadership was out of Moscow, with Putin having just arrived at the Olympic Games in Beijing. President Saakashvili had only just returned from a trip to a Tyrolean health farm five days before. The first sign that international observers saw of a Georgian military build-up was on the morning of August 7. Some kind of operation had been discussed many times before, however. Georgian sources have reported that Saakashvili had made plans long before to launch a reconquest operation for either Abkhazia or South Ossetia. His former defence minister Irakli Okruashvili, one of the hawks who favoured this option, said later from exile in France, “Abkhazia was our strategic priority, but we drew up military plans in 2005 for taking both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well... The original plans called for a two-pronged operation entering South Ossetia, taking Tskhinvali, the Roki Tunnel and Java. Saakashvili’s offensive only aimed at taking

⁷⁶ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, p. 15, available at: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf.

Tskhinvali, because he thought the U.S. would block a Russian reaction through diplomatic channels.”⁷⁷

So, all things considered:

“We do not know of any better way to understand the root causes of the 2008 conflict in Georgia than through the minds of those who took part and those who had suffered. We will come to know that all sides involved in the conflict had their grievances, that their actions had origins in their experience and memory, and that most of those taking part thought that what they did had to be done”⁷⁸.”

Finally, we can therefore agree that both sides are to blame, who more who less. Both countries acted in a way that increased tension between them, and which culminated in a “panic” action that ignited the situation.

⁷⁷ De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010, NY, p. 219.

⁷⁸ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, p. 10, available at: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf.

CHAPTER 2

BORDERIZATION AND ENERGY SECURITY

2.1 – THE MOVING BORDER

One of the main issues after the war, which is still deeply affecting the relations between the two countries, is the so-called “moving border”. Russia installed a barbed wire fence and green signs declaring the start of a state border to mark the boundary line between South Ossetia and Georgia. This phenomenon is called “Borderization”, which means the creation of barriers in order to establish an official international border⁷⁹. This line divides families, villages, fields and economies, and it led to numerous restrictions on freedom of movement and human rights violation too. As Amnesty International states⁸⁰:

“Whole communities are being cut off from vital resources of income and other important aspects of their lives – punished solely because of where they happen to live.”

Since the end of the war, Russia exercises de-facto control over the two territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; for this reason, it should respect obligations under international humanitarian law and fulfil human rights. However, this is not happening, leading to detention, kidnapping and interrogation of ordinary citizens along the border, increasing strain between the two countries⁸¹. People found their properties and villages split overnight, unable to see relatives and friends on the other side of the border, and unable to get access to their pensions, crops and goods on the Georgian side⁸².

⁷⁹ The Embassy of Georgia to the USA, available at: <https://icds.ge/en/12-years-on-from-russias-military-aggression-against-georgia/>.

⁸⁰ *Georgia/Russia: Post-conflict boundary splits communities, leaving thousands in limbo*, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/georgiarussia-post-conflict-boundary-splits-communities-leaving-thousands-in-limbo/>.

⁸¹ Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, available at: <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/events/russias-occupation-georgia-and-erosion-international-order>.

⁸² Coffey, L. *America must stay focused on Georgia's de-occupation and transatlantic path*, Middle East Institute, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/america-must-stay-focused-georgias-de-occupation-and-transatlantic-path>.

Along the Administrative Boundary Line, border patrols act aggressively not only against people who violate border, but also against people who are simply close to the border, affecting communities of all ethnic backgrounds on both sides, and creating frictions between Russian and Georgian governments.

One of the main issues in the occupied areas is for sure trade. Occupation has a devastating effect in a region where cross-boundary trade was very active, causing the loss of the nearest market for local producers. Consequently, the lives of many people were ruined, resulting in the need to cross the border for basic needs. Nonetheless, crossings that are not made at designated crossing points, and without proper documents which are often hard to secure, are considered illegal by the Russian and local de-facto authorities. Because of this reason, hundreds of people are arbitrarily detained every year, some of whom have allegedly been beaten and subjected to other ill-treatment in detention⁸³.

I would like to make a brief digression on this topic not only because it is one of the current main causes of tension between Russia and Georgia, but also to underline how normal citizens are the ones who are paying the highest price in this quarrel.

There are hundreds of instances of people detained, beaten or killed, but I will choose just a few to give an idea to the reader of how serious the situation at the border is.

One of the most discussed and relevant cases is the murder of Archil Tatumashvili, a former Georgian military officer⁸⁴. He died in custody at the young age of 35 in the occupied territory of South Ossetia on February 23, 2018, leading a period of national mourning.

To better understand what happened I will briefly describe the events with the words of the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia. The Prosecutor's Office released a statement in that regard:

⁸³ Ibid. 80

⁸⁴ De Waal, T. *South Ossetia Today*, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/06/11/south-ossetia-today-pub-80788>.

“The conducted investigation determined that citizen of Georgia Archil Tatumashvili periodically went to the occupied Akhagori district where he was engaged in the small entrepreneurial activity. On 20 February 2018, after the leaving of the above-mentioned territory, it became known for so-called Law enforcement officers of Occupied Tskhinvali region that Archil Tatumashvili served in the Georgian Armed Forces in August 2008, so they decided to punish and torture him.

On 22 February 2018, citizens of Georgia Archil Tatumashvili, I.P., and L.K. entered the occupied territory of Akhagori from the controlled territory by the Georgian government where they transported the fruit-vegetables by the car owned by Archil Tatumashvili and which was driven by L.K. The above-mentioned circumstance became known to the so-called Law enforcement officers of Occupied Tskhinvali region, who decided to illegally deprive Archil Tatumashvili of liberty, to bring him to the favorable location and torture him.

In order to accomplish the goal, on 22 February 2018, near the village Mosabruni in Akhagori district, the Deputy Prosecutor of the so called Prosecutor’s Office of Akhagori David Gurtsiev and the head of division of the so called KGB service Alik Taboev, and other employees of so called Law enforcement officers of Occupied Tskhinvali region, in group, illegally deprived them of liberty and at first they transferred Archil Tatumashvili, and later- I.P. and L.K. to the so called Security Service Building, where Archil Tatumashvili was handcuffed and handed over to so-called Law enforcement armed officers of Occupied Tskhinvali region in order to torture him, who brought him to Tskhinvali.

Before transferring Archil Tatumashvili to Tskhinvali, I.P. and L.K. were temporarily released, though later they were deprived of liberty again.

In the building of the so call Prosecutor Office the Law enforcement officers of Occupied Tskhinvali region, tortured Archil Tatumashvili for

*participation in the August war in 2008, they inflicted to him more than 100 different types of injuries. Later Archil Tatumashvili passed away”.*⁸⁵

Tatumashvili’s case is part of a new inter-state application being lodged by Georgia against Russia before the European Court of Human Rights. The Government of Georgia has filed a new application with the European Court of Human Rights against the Russian Federation. It relates to the alleged recent deterioration of the human rights situation along the administrative boundary lines between Georgian-controlled territory and Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There are now three Georgia v. Russia inter-State applications pending before the Court. The Georgian Government relies on Articles 2 (right to life), 3 (prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment), 5 (right to liberty and security), 8 (right to respect for private and family life), 13 (right to an effective remedy), 14 (prohibition of discrimination) and 18 (limitation on use of restrictions on rights) of the Convention, Articles 1 (protection of property) and 2 (right to education) of Protocol No. 1 and Article 2 (freedom of movement) of Protocol No. 4.⁸⁶

As aforementioned in this chapter, the violation of all these human rights are almost a daily occurrence, with thousands of cases filed to the ECHR for abuses by the authorities in the occupied territory. The situation has never changed since the 2008 war for people who live close to the border and for people whose economic activities relied in that area, and while the international community keeps strongly support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, the above-mentioned case acknowledge the urgency to the prompt creation of adequate and effective international mechanisms.

The South-Ossetian delegation protested against Georgia's attempt to raise the Tatumashvili's case. Also, it was stated that starting from December 18, 2018, South-Ossetian law enforcers counted 11 border violations.

South-Ossetian delegates complained about "disinformation spread by Georgian mass media; in particular, about kidnappings, humanitarian catastrophe, and that our people are starving," the "Sputnik South Ossetia" has quoted Mr Kochiev as saying⁸⁷.

⁸⁵ Available at: <https://dfwatch.net/georgia-indicts-two-south-ossetian-officials-tatumashvilis-torture-murder-50565>.

⁸⁶ Available at: [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press#{"itemid": "\[003-6176209-8005403\]"}.](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press#{)

⁸⁷ Caucasian Knot, available at: <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/46114/>.

Messages of condolence and support were sent from many states and international actors, sign of how important the situation along the occupied borders is, considering that it is not only an element of tension between Georgia and Russia, but also between third party actors.

An instance is the statement made by the US embassy in Georgia to OSCE on the death of Archil Tatumashvili:

“The United States is deeply concerned by the death of Georgian citizen Archil Tatumashvili during his February 22 arrest and detention in Tskhinvali. We express our condolences to Mr. Tatumashvili’s family and call on the responsible persons, including Russian officials exercising de facto control over Georgia’s South Ossetia region, to provide the Georgian government with a full accounting of the circumstances of this tragic incident. The United States is also deeply concerned by the arrest of Georgian citizens Levan Kutashvili and Ioseb Pavliashvili and calls on the de facto authorities to allow their immediate freedom of movement across the administrative boundary line. We continue to encourage all sides to agree on additional measures to strengthen mutual confidence and transparency in the affected region”.

“The United States reiterates its full support for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and rejects Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We once again urge Russia to fulfill all of its obligations under the 2008 ceasefire agreement, to withdraw its forces to pre-conflict positions, to reverse its recognition of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and to provide free access for humanitarian assistance to these regions. We also reiterate our call for justice in the May 2016 murder of Georgian citizen Giga Otkhзорia along the administrative boundary line of the occupied territory of Abkhazia in Georgia⁸⁸”.

⁸⁸ Available at: <https://osce.usmission.gov/on-the-death-of-georgian-citizen-archil-tatumashvili-in-georgias-south-ossetia-region/>.

The events of early 2018 raised further concern in the European Union too. The tragic events surrounding Archil Tatunashvili caused outrage not only in Georgia, but well beyond it – with the West calling for thorough investigation of the incident. Ana Gomes was one of many European Parliament members unable to hide their indignation whilst speaking with "Messages From Brussels" Series.⁸⁹

The EUMM, even without the permission to access the occupied territory of South Ossetia, tries to do its best to facilitate the dialogue between the parties as stated in March 2018, after the release of the body of the former officer:

The EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) welcomes the fact that the body of Mr. Archil Tatunashvili was finally released to his family.

The Mission has been facilitating dialogue over the EUMM-managed Hotline on this tragic case during the past weeks.

The EUMM, in its monitoring capacity and in line with its Mandate, follows developments closely.

The EUMM reaffirms its readiness to support ongoing investigations and to facilitate discussions through the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) and the Hotline.

The Mission calls for a swift agreement between participants on the resumption of the IPRM meetings in Ergneti, which are co-facilitated by the EUMM and the OSCE.⁹⁰

South Ossetia accused Georgian government of using the case of Archil Tatunashvili, who died in South Ossetian custody reportedly after being tortured, for its own populist interests to gain ‘political dividends’, on the background of an unstable political situation.

⁸⁹ Available at: <http://www.eugeorgia.com/en/projects-and-events/eafg-news/92-mep-gomes-on-the-tatunashvili-case-messages-from-brussels>.

⁹⁰ Available at: https://eumm.eu/en/press_and_public_information/press_releases/6241/.

South Ossetian authorities also stated that they are considering similar measures against certain categories of Georgian citizens, so that justice reaches those who committed crimes against Ossetians.

On June 28, South Ossetian Parliamentary Speaker Pyotr Gassiyev confirmed to Russian state-run media Sputnik Ossetia that they were working on their own list named after Grigory Sanakoyev, which will include Georgian, Ukrainian, American and other citizens. According to Ossetian sources, 18-year-old Grigory (Grishik) Sanakoyev was tortured and killed in 1991 in Tskhinvali (Tskhinval), during the Georgian–Ossetian conflict.

‘There is no doubt that such “sanctioning” activities will definitely, and not in a good way, influence the atmosphere of international talks in Geneva and will make cooperation within the framework of Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) more difficult’, a statement from South Ossetia’s Foreign Ministry reads⁹¹.

Another relevant case, which is very recent, is the one of Zaza Gakheladze. On July 11, 2020, Gakheladze was shot and arrested near the boundary line dividing Georgia from South Ossetia. Tskhinvali authorities claim that Gakheladze crossed the “State border” and opened fire on border protection staff after their appearance on the scene⁹², and was shot by the returning fire from the patrol. The Georgian citizen was brought first to the local hospital in Akhalkgori, and then to a temporary detention prison. On the other side, relatives of the victim alleged that he was gathering mushrooms when he was arrested.

Georgia’s Foreign Ministry condemned the “injuring and unlawful arrest” of the 33-year old Gakheladze, saying that the incident represented an example of a "flagrant violation" of the 2008 ceasefire deal between Russia and Georgia that followed the five-day armed conflict centred around the Tskhinvali region. This event also goes against calls by the United Nations Secretary General for a global ceasefire because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The statement also demanded the immediate return of Gakheladze

⁹¹ OC Media, *Russia and South Ossetia slam Otkhozoria–Tatunashvili list*, available at: <https://oc-media.org/russia-and-south-ossetia-slam-otkhozoria-tatunashvili-list/>.

⁹² *Georgian citizen shot and detained by Tskhinvali forces*, available at: <https://caucasuswatch.de/news/2900.html>.

to the Georgian side and urged Russia to ensure unlimited access to international humanitarian and human rights organisations to the occupied territories⁹³.

The EUMM's hotline was immediately activated and stated it had been involved in an exchange of information on the incident and called for a prompt resumption of the IPRM⁹⁴.

Furthermore, other international actors expressed concern about this fact. Both the US and UNDP representations to Georgia condemn the incident and Russia's behaviour stating as follow:

U.S. Embassy Tbilisi is alarmed and deeply troubled by reports that Russian-led security forces shot, wounded, and detained a Georgian citizen on July 11 near the village of Kvemo Chala, along the administrative boundary line of Russian-occupied South Ossetia. We condemn this shooting and detention -- another escalation in a series of provocative actions taken by Russian-led forces in recent weeks. Such a dangerous and unwarranted incident would not have occurred if Russia had fulfilled its commitments under the 2008 ceasefire agreement, including withdrawing its forces to pre-conflict positions and allowing unfettered access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. We call for the immediate release of the Georgian detained in this incident. The United States remains resolute in its support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is imperative, particularly for the safety of civilians, that Russia halt its destabilizing actions, fulfill its commitments under the 2008 ceasefire agreement, and cease its occupation of Georgia⁹⁵.

State Security Service of Georgia also stated that this kind of incidents are not uncommon and raise tension between parties; it condemns the dangerous practice of

⁹³ Foreign ministry "categorically condemns" shooting, arrest of citizen by occupation forces, available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2207>.

⁹⁴ Ergneti Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism.

⁹⁵ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/usingeo/posts/10158449548257954>.

illegal detentions which creates fertile ground for major events and escalation of the situation⁹⁶.

From South Ossetia authorities' point of view the circumstances were slightly different. Tigran Kabulov, the military prosecutor of South Ossetia, asserted that Gakheladze illegally crossed the boundary line bearing a rifle. He was ordered to stop by border patrol, but he ignored the command and tried to escape while shooting guards. Hence, the border guards, acting legally, were forced to return fire, and wounded him. Kabulov added that a criminal case was initiated against the detained citizen of Georgia for encroachment on the life of a serviceman and illegal crossing of the state border (according to Part 1 of Article 322 and Article 317 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation).

In addition, South Ossetia's KGB recently stated how Georgian regime exploits the events to politicize the situation and turn to its favour the international opinion. It also said that some Georgian politicians complain about the ineffectiveness of international mechanisms whereas, at the same time, they don't complain about the counterproductive position of Tbilisi towards Tskhinvali. By the policy of denying the sovereignty of the Republic of South Ossetia, the Georgian side deprives itself of any opportunities for a civilized resolution of the conflict situation, and then actively presents its absurd complaints.

Tskhinvali's KGB concluded saying that Zaza Gakheladze does not need the support of international actors, but the support of qualified lawyers⁹⁷.

The case of Zaza Gakheladze is still ongoing, providing the basis for protests in Tbilisi, and fostering anti-occupation movements spread across Georgia⁹⁸.

Since this episode happened on the "12th Anniversary of the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war", the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia released a harsh statement towards Russia and the occupation forces, pushing the release of imprisoned Georgian citizens⁹⁹. The assertion started with the illegal occupation by Russia of Georgia's

⁹⁶ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/sssgeo/posts/3117895351597910>.

⁹⁷ Available at: <http://cominf.org/en/node/1166531143>.

⁹⁸ Available at: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/family-of-zaza-gakheladze-and-citizens-held-protest-rally/>.

⁹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, available at: [https://mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-2008-c-\(3\).aspx?lang=en-US](https://mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-2008-c-(3).aspx?lang=en-US).

indivisible regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as an illicit attempt to redraw sovereign borders in Europe and an explicit violation of the fundamental principles of international law. The Georgian MFA also stated of his tiredness of not seen the 2008 Ceasefire Agreement implemented, and underlined how every year Russia intensifies the illegal militarization of Georgia's occupied regions and takes steps towards their annexation.

He also highlights how “The gross violations of the fundamental human rights, ethnic discrimination and infringement of right of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their homes still remain a heavy humanitarian burden of the Russian illegal occupation”¹⁰⁰. Simultaneously, the detention and murder of Georgian citizens increases the threat of ethnic violence, a constantly recurring phenomenon in the whole Caucasus region.

The statement carries on with the concern that the occupying forces continue to prevent access of international mechanisms such as the EUMM, and international human rights organizations like NGOs or international aids.

To conclude, the MFA spoke directly to Russia and asked directly for help the international community:

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia calls upon the Russian Federation to cease its illegal and provocative steps against Georgia, fulfil its obligations undertaken vis-à-vis the EU under the 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, withdraw its forces from Georgia's territory and reverse its illegal decision on recognition of the so-called independence of Georgia's occupied regions.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia appeals to the international community to direct its consolidated efforts to ensure the de-occupation of Georgia's territories and return of all IDPs and refugees to their homes, and take effective steps to facilitate peace and security in Georgia and Eastern Europe”¹⁰¹.

¹⁰⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, available at: [https://mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-2008-c-\(3\).aspx?lang=en-US](https://mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-2008-c-(3).aspx?lang=en-US).

¹⁰¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, available at: [https://mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-2008-c-\(3\).aspx?lang=en-US](https://mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-2008-c-(3).aspx?lang=en-US).

Before concluding this chapter with the last major consequence of the so-called “Borderization”, I would like to point out some information:

1. The standard fine to pay if captured by occupation forces near the border is between 25-30 euros¹⁰², which is quite a burden for rural people who survives on subsistence.
2. Only between 2017 and 2019 border patrols have detained 327 Georgian citizens for illegally crossing the state border affirm the Georgian State Security Service.
3. The ethnic conflicts in the early 90s and the 2008 August War have forced almost 300.000 people to become IDP¹⁰³ and refugees¹⁰⁴.
4. When Russia recognised the two breakaway territories, life became hard for Georgian citizen there, especially in Abkhazia. They must ask for a residence permit in their own country, with limited rights; additionally, in order to receive Abkhaz passport, they have to renounce their Georgian citizenship or change their name and register as ethnic Abkhazian. The educational system is all based on Russian books, and Georgian is taught as a foreign language¹⁰⁵, even if Abkhaz constitution¹⁰⁶ guarantees every ethnic group the right to study in their native language (for instance Armenians have Armenian schools in Abkhazia), however this is not the case of Georgians living in Abkhazia¹⁰⁷.

All things considered, the situation along the two borders is frozen even if there are some skirmishes sometimes. However, one must bear in mind that this “Administrative Boundary Line” has the power to plunge the situation very quickly, therefore it is important to check often and carefully what happens close to it, because it could be the spark that sets new ethnic conflicts or, even worse, a new inter-state conflict that could have consequences far beyond Georgia.

¹⁰² Available at: <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/18184/3-Georgian-Citizens-Released-from-Tskhinvali>.

¹⁰³ Internally Displaced Person: people who are forced to flee their homes, but they remain within their own country.

¹⁰⁴ Danish Refugee Council, available at: <https://drc.ngo/where-we-work/europe/georgia>.

¹⁰⁵ Study on educational system in Abkhazia (p. 25-41): http://www.etd.ceu.edu/2017/zhunussova_zhuldyz.pdf.

¹⁰⁶ Available at: <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/reports-and-key-texts/607-constitution-of-the-republic-of-abkhazia-apsny>.

¹⁰⁷ Available at: <https://caucasuswatch.de/news/2960.html>.

2.2 - ENERGY SECURITY IN GEORGIA

The final issue created by this “moving border” is about energy security. There are many pipelines which cross Georgia coming from Central Asia, particularly from Azerbaijan.

In 1994, a Production Sharing Agreement was awarded to a BP-led consortium, Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC), for the development of the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli (ACG) oil field off the coast of Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea.

Hence, BP¹⁰⁸ first came to Georgia in 1996 when work began on the Chirag oil field and plans were laid for the ‘Early Oil Project’, including the Western Route Export Pipeline (WREP). This runs from Baku to the Georgian Black Sea port of Supsa and was the first of three major BP-led projects in Georgia. The Supsa terminal was opened in April 1999 when the first tanker of oil departed for global markets¹⁰⁹.



Georgia has always been the natural corridor for oil and gas coming from Azerbaijan and Central Asia due to its stability. The southern region of Azerbaijan is too unstable to build a pipeline, with countries such as Iran, Iraq and Syria; the western part

¹⁰⁸ BP = Baku Pipeline.

¹⁰⁹ Available at: https://www.bp.com/en_ge/georgia/home/who-we-are/history.html.

is inaccessible since Armenia and Azerbaijan are historical enemies and the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is still threatening energy projects in the region. Hence, the fastest way for energy to reach Europe and the Mediterranean Sea is through Georgia, as you can see from the map above.

By setting up opportunities for Azerbaijan to export its oil to Western energy markets while bypassing Russia, the new Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline launched a new era for Azerbaijan's economic development in 2006. No longer dependent on Russia for oil export, it could rely on Georgia and Turkey to connect with Western energy markets.

Nowadays there are three significant pipelines passing through Georgia, but the one I will talk about is the Baku-Supsa pipeline, of which a part is now under the Russian controlled region of Tskhinvali, rising the concern of energy both in Georgia and in Europe.

The realization of the project was a political and economic victory for both Georgia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan aimed to export its Azeri Light oil directly to the global energy markets without mixing it with Russia's lower quality "Urals" branded oil, which would have required a different export route. Georgia became a transit country and a bridge connecting Caspian energy resources with global energy markets. The Baku-Supsa oil pipeline opened a very important door for Georgia, enabling it to participate in future energy projects.

Moreover, from a geopolitical point of view, was the first project connecting the South Caucasus countries more closely with the Western world in general. It pointed toward the integration of Azerbaijan and Georgia with Europe and contributed to their economy, political stability and energy security, as well as to Europe's security of energy supply¹¹⁰.

Azerbaijan is a reliable partner for the West and contributes to Europe's energy security and, at the same time, these pipelines projects allow Azerbaijan to bypass Russia, which today has the monopoly of Europe's oil and gas no more.

¹¹⁰ HajiyeV, S. *The South Caucasus conflict and energy security: OPINION*, available at: https://news.az/news/the-south-caucasus-conflict-and-energy-security-opinion?__cf_chl_jschl_tk.

Recently, in 2015, Russia's game of redrawing borders has sized a 1.5 kilometer piece of the Baku-Supsa pipeline, obliging Tbilisi to ask the international community for help¹¹¹.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia expressed deeply concerned about the situation in a statement:

On July 10th of the current year, Russian Occupying Forces illegally placed banners marking the so called 'border' on the territory adjacent to the village of Tsitelubani of Gori municipality and the village of Orchosani in occupied Akhlagori district in close vicinity to the Tbilisi-Gori central highway.

It's worth noting, that certain segments of Baku-Supsa pipeline run in the vicinity of the both areas and with this illegal action a certain portion of the pipeline next to the village Orchosani fell within the occupied territory.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia expresses deep concern over deliberate provocative actions by the Russian occupying forces, which are directed towards destabilization of the situation and pose a threat to peace and stability on the ground¹¹².

K'akhaber K'aladze, back then Ministry of Energy of Georgia remarked that, if any problem arose with the functioning of the seized facility, it can be rerouted¹¹³.

As well as the seizure of a part of the pipeline, it is cited that the border is now very close to the Tbilisi-Gori Central Highway, which is the only big road crossing Georgia. Therefore, if the "Administrative Boundary Line" cut this highway, it will be a considerable issue for Georgians to travel throughout their own country. The East-West highway is also used by most traffic from neighbouring Azerbaijan and Armenia to Black Sea ports and to Turkey.

¹¹¹ Lomsadze, G. *Georgia: Russia Occupies BP Oil Pipeline*, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-russia-occupies-bp-oil-pipeline>.

¹¹² Available at: <https://police.ge/en/shinagan-saqmeta-saministros-gantskhadeba/8471>.

¹¹³ *Russian Troops Demarcate Part Of Georgian Oil Pipeline*, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-troops-demarcate-georgian-oil-pipeline/27126985.html>.

In conclusion, the Russian strategy nicknamed “creeping occupation” is heavily affecting the life of Georgian citizens and the soundness of some Georgian infrastructures, with implications not only for the relationships between Russia and Georgia, but also for Europe¹¹⁴. For Tbilisi there is nothing left but hope in a greater help from international actors, since it cannot face alone an overwhelming power that is Russia.

¹¹⁴ International Center for Defence and Security, available at: <https://icds.ee/en/12-years-on-from-russias-military-aggression-against-georgia/>.

CHAPTER 3

AN INSIDE LOOK AT ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA

3.1 - ABKHAZIA AND THE RELATIONSHIPS WITH RUSSIA

During the last decade, Russia has tried more and more to formalise its assistance to the Post-Soviet de facto states. The Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia in the footsteps of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance signed on September 17, 2008, in Moscow, further improved their friendly relations with the development of an “alliance and strategic partnership” which will “meet the national interests of the peoples of both countries, serve the cause of peace, security and stability in the Caucasus region”¹¹⁵.

The treaty establishes a coordinated foreign and security policy (art. 4– 5), and highlights that a common position is to be agreed in all important matters related to security. A joint military force is to be established (art. 5); in case of aggression, the Russian Federation is to head this joint force (art. 7). To facilitate joint operations, the Abkhazian armed forces are to be modernised and adapt to Russian standards of operation; all related expenses are to be paid by the Russian Federation (art. 8). According to the treaty, public servants working for the ministry of interior (art. 10), as well as people working in a number of sectors (health, education, science, culture, sport, and social services) and pensioners with Russian citizenship are due to have their incomes increased to the level found in Russia’s southern federal district (art. 14). Health (art. 17) and education (art. 20) are to be brought in line with the quality standards set in the Russian Federation. Some benefits included in the treaty, such as an increase in the pensions and access to health care in Russia, are meant only for residents of Abkhazia with Russian citizenship; however, this seems to be based on the assumption that double Abkhazian-Russian citizenship is the norm, rather than the exception. Besides, Russia is to facilitate the procedure for obtaining Russian citizenship for citizens of Abkhazia (art. 13). The treaty also includes provisions that address key goals of the local leadership in Abkhazia,

¹¹⁵ Kremlin.ru., *Treaty between the Russian federation and the republic of Abkhazia on alliance and strategic partnership*. Retrieved from: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4783>.

including support to efforts for strengthening Abkhaz language use (art. 21) and an obligation to take measures aimed at extending Abkhazia's international contacts, including by facilitating its membership in international organisations and its international recognition as a sovereign state (art. 4)¹¹⁶.

As regard the economy, “following the implementation of the CIS blockade, Russian authorities acted to eliminate cross border trade. In their extremity these measures included a ban on cross-border travel for all Abkhaz males aged 10-55 (de Waal 2010, 165). The sanctions regime initially served to isolate Abkhazia from the outside world, however the implementation degraded over time. In 1996-1999 Abkhazia's foreign interaction was limited to its Turkish vector; without this trade outlet it is likely that Abkhazia would have ceased to function. Russia largely ceased to observe the CIS sanctions in 1999 and withdrew from the sanctions regime entirely in March 2008 (Socor 2008), initially improving Abkhazian economic prospects through an increase in low-level cross-border trade and later through large-scale investment. The range of Russian investors in Abkhazia before the official lifting of sanctions (the Moscow city administration and Krasnodar region invested heavily) indicate the depth to which the sanctions had lost validity (Wenger et al 2006, 220-228). Following Russian recognition, the Abkhazian government has been overwhelmingly dependent on Russia for budget and development funds. The International Crisis Group (ICG) ascertained that since 2009 Russia has provided roughly 1.9 billion rubles (\$57.3m) per year in direct budgetary support, in 2012 this amounted to 22 percent of the official state budget. However, taking into account a further 4.9 billion rubles (\$147.9m) designated as part of a “comprehensive aid plan” for infrastructure development the ICG determined the actual subsidy to the Abkhaz government to be at least 70 percent in 2012. This does not include an estimated 2 billion rubles (\$60.4m) in Russian pension payments for residents of Abkhazia (International Crisis Group 2013). The Abkhazian press reports the 2013 figure at 3.3 billion rubles (\$100.9m), although this refers only to direct financial aid and does not include pension payments and commercial contracts (Apsny Press 2013e). This direct support is coupled with the granting to Russia of exclusive rights regarding key areas for the development of the Abkhazian economy, most notably offshore exploration and

¹¹⁶ Comai, Giorgio. 2018. ‘Conceptualising Post-Soviet de Facto States as Small Dependent Jurisdictions’. *Ethnopolitics* 17 (2): 181–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2017.1393210>.

development, and the operation of the rail network. The granting to the Russian state company Rosneft of offshore exploration rights received heavy criticism from the Georgian government, decrying the move as further proof of “Russian occupation”. In a concurrent statement Rosneft openly acknowledged its role as an arm of Russian policy and as such confirmed it intended to work with Abkhazia as a sovereign state (Watkins 2009). Abkhazia handed over control of its railway and major airport to Russian management for a 10-year period in May 2009; under this agreement Abkhazia was set to receive a 2 million-ruble (\$60,000) credit from Moscow for reconstruction of the railway. Then president Bagapsh felt compelled to announce: “This is not a sale. It’s a transfer for a temporary period.”¹¹⁷

3.2 - ABKHAZIA AND ITS ENGAGEMENT WITH INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

After the fall of the USSR, contacts with international organizations took place in connection with conflict resolution efforts vis-à-vis Georgia.

However, in recent years and especially after the 2008 August War, these organizations, which are mainly the UN and EU, found some obstacles in dealing with Abkhazia, since its semi-recognised status serves as an issue to the engagement of it into dialogue processes¹¹⁸.

The United Nations is committed by its charter to the territorial integrity of its members (United Nations Charter), immediately creating a bias in favour of Georgia in any negotiations initiated regarding the status of or policy towards Abkhazia. This unavoidable position compromises the UN’s role as a potential mediator in discussions on the status of Abkhazia and strengthens the perceived dichotomy between the UN and the Russian Federation as actors¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Frear (2014) The foreign policy options of a small unrecognised state: the case of Abkhazia, *Caucasus Survey*, 1:2, 83-107, DOI: 10.1080/23761199.2014.11417293.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 117

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 117

The only real achievement, even if very small, was reached by the Geneva talks in 2008. In October, an international mediation process – the Geneva talks – started over the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts. The negotiations began with high expectations. Predictably, many of these have not been met yet. The main failure of the talks has been the inability to prevent Russia from vetoing the extension of the UN and OSCE missions to Georgia’s breakaway regions. After two years, the – already high – level of scepticism amongst the conflict parties of reaching peace through diplomacy has increased. To date, the Geneva talks have achieved limited concrete results: Russia’s decision to withdraw its military troops from Perevi, a small Georgian village beyond the South Ossetian administrative border. More broadly, the forum remains a unique international mediation platform, which keeps the conflict parties at the negotiating table and in contact with one another¹²⁰.

On the other side, the role of the European Union (EU) in Abkhazian policy can be understood as operating on multiple levels: firstly, the systemic influence of the EU in its bordering regions; secondly, the direct policies of EU instruments such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the European Commission, and thirdly, the unilateral or multilateral engagement of its constituent member states¹²¹.

A good point of view is that the EU’s strategy to focus on improving living standards in Georgia, can theoretically make an Abkhazian re-integration into Georgia more desirable for Abkhazians.

From 1993 to 2008, the EU was just a background actor in the Abkhazian conflict resolution process compared to other international actors such as OSCE, CIS and the UN, limiting itself to the provision of aid.

However, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the UN and OSCE missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia respectively, the EU has become the primary international peacekeeper between Georgia and the separatist entities through the deployment of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) on 15 September 2008¹²². The EUMM’s mandate consists of: “Stabilisation, normalisation and confidence building, as well as

¹²⁰ Mikhelidze, N. *The Geneva Talks over Georgia’s Territorial Conflicts: Achievements and Challenges*, available at: <http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1025.pdf>.

¹²¹ Ibid. 117

¹²² Ibid. 117

reporting to the EU in order to inform European policy-making and thus contribute to the future EU engagement in the region”¹²³.

Nevertheless, EU engagement with Abkhazia has been qualitatively poor, initially ceding the role of primary mediator in the conflict resolution process to other organisations, and subsequently pursuing an unclear strategy that has severely damaged the union’s reputation and capacity to act in the region. The EU has consistently failed to utilise its systemic leverage over Abkhazia, a task made impossible by the lack of a regular dialogue with the Abkhaz authorities¹²⁴.

As regards relations with Georgia, there are no relations at all. Georgia keeps avoid a dialogue with Sukhumi because it does not recognize it and sees it as a part of its territory, whereas the only actor and invader to deal with is Russia. However, from 2020 the situation can change.

3.3 - ABKHAZIA-GEORGIA, A POSSIBLE DIALOGUE?

Nowadays, Georgia’s breakaway region of Abkhazia is undergoing a deep political crisis coupled with troubles in its relationship with Russia. This plight could potentially open to a rapprochement with the government in Tbilisi, and Abkhaz politicians have already come out with some bold statements. Although Abkhazia’s continual dependence on Russian financial and military support will keep the region under the Kremlin’s control, the emerging trends also suggest that tensions between Russia and Abkhazia will continue and grow¹²⁵.

This year (2020), leaving aside the pandemic, was a complex year for politics in Abkhazia. Protests started in early January, when people stormed the government building causing the resignation of Raul Khajimba, president of the Republic of Abkhazia since 2014. Another important event was the resignation of Vladislav Surkov at the end of January, a Russian envoy sent by the Kremlin to mediate the transfer of power. He also

¹²³ European Union Monitoring Mission, available at: <https://www.eumm.eu/>.

¹²⁴ Ibid. 117

¹²⁵ Avdaliani, E. *Emerging Room for Rapport Between Sokhumi Tbilisi*, available at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13627-emerging-room-for-rapport-between-sokhumi-tbilisi.html>.

had important links with Khajimba and was a key actor in the internal politics of not only Abkhazia, but also Ukraine's Donbass and South Ossetia.

These events create discontent in Moscow, worried about its position in the region. Recent political developments in the separatist region fit into the overall instability in Abkhazia. Nonetheless, several interesting trends indicate that the political differences between Sokhumi and Moscow are now deeper than ever before. Still, statements by several prominent Abkhaz politicians also indicate that Sokhumi has become more open to the idea of conducting direct negotiations with Tbilisi¹²⁶.

The new elected president of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, does not reflect Russia's direct preference. He was poisoned twice, leading to speculations on Kremlin responsibility and frictions between Bzhania and Moscow.

Moreover, Bzhania's vision of Abkhazia is not compatible with Moscow's interests in the South Caucasus. The thinking among Abkhaz politicians regarding relations with the government in Tbilisi is gradually changing. Direct negotiations with Tbilisi have long been a taboo policy issue in Abkhazia. Nevertheless, Bzhania has made statements that markedly differed from the traditional line: "whether we [Abkhazians] like it or not, Georgians and the Georgian state are our neighbours. Whether we like it or not, we have a lot of contacts at the level of Georgian and Abkhaz citizens. These are the people who cross the border." This sentiment is seemingly not limited to Bzhania. Sergey Shamba, another Abkhaz politician, has long been advocating a normalization of relations with Tbilisi in one way or another. This could indicate that a certain scope for direct talks with Tbilisi is emerging¹²⁷.

Other long-term problems have likely influenced this evolution of political thinking in Abkhazia. The region has failed to gain wider recognition of its "independence." Aside from Russia, only a few small states have so far recognized the region, and the long-term prospect for improving the situation is far-fetched. In addition, the region is continually beset by deep economic problems and the forecast is negative, since the EU, the U.S. and other global or regional actors avoid economic engagement with the region in support of the Georgian government. More significant, however, is the

¹²⁶ Ibid. 115

¹²⁷ Ibid. 115

official U.S. policy of refusing any financial assistance to countries supporting Abkhazia. Under these circumstances, the region's economic outlook is unlikely to improve in the coming decades, which will further exacerbate the existing social tensions and an already large outflow of youngsters. These long-term political and economic prospects have likely influenced the thinking in Sokhumi¹²⁸.

Yet the more direct and emerging trend is the deterioration of Abkhaz-Russian relations, which has led Abkhaz politicians to reconsider long-established policies. Moscow is discontent with the management of Russian financial aid in the region. Occasional statements and comments from Kremlin-linked Russian pundits indicate the essence of the problem: The Kremlin worries about the increasingly predatory economic behaviour on part of the Abkhaz political elite. Few efforts are made to improve the economic and security situation in the region, as shown by a growing number of murders of Russian nationals over the past several years. Every level of the Abkhaz administration demonstrates persistent and widespread corruption. Russian politicians have also voiced objections to the consistent refusal of the Abkhaz government to allow purchases of land by Russian citizens. The prospect of land sales has occasionally caused outbursts of public protests in Sokhumi and constitutes a further dividing line between the separatist regime and its patron¹²⁹.

All things considered, the new elected government of the Republic of Abkhazia provides a real possibility of a trade-off between Sukhumi and Tbilisi. Abkhazian people and politicians are starting to think about a peacefully solution with Georgian people. Nevertheless, the situation is more complicate than what it seems: even if in good will, a dialogue between the two parties remains unlikely, because it must be considered that Abkhazia's military and economy leans on Russian aids. However, the ineffective spending of Russia's money and the deteriorating condition of Abkhazia's economy may create the right circumstance for an opening with Georgia.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 115

¹²⁹ Ibid. 115

3.4 - SOUTH OSSETIA RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

The situation in South Ossetia is comparable to the one in Abkhazia, notwithstanding it is not the same. Russia's engagement in this region is less compared to that in Abkhazia, mainly because of the minor interests it has in this area.

There is a slight difference between this treaty and the one with Abkhazia, this one is called "Alliance and Integration" instead of "Alliance and Strategic Partnership", which suggests how different Russia's purposes are in the long run in each of the two territories.

I will cite just the first three articles to get an idea of how the treaty is structured and until what limit bounds.

In Article 1 it is written that "the Contracting Parties shall pursue a coordinated foreign policy, which implies mutual consideration of the interests of the Contracting Parties in various spheres of cooperation, informing each other about the actions taken in this regard, and also closely interact in strengthening peace, increasing stability and security in the Caucasus region".

Moreover, the Russian Federation will do its utmost to promote the development of international relations of the Republic of South Ossetia, including expanding the circle of states that officially recognized it, and creating conditions for the Republic of South Ossetia to join international organizations and associations, including those created on the initiative and (or) with the assistance of the Russian Federation¹³⁰.

The Contracting Parties (Art. 2), taking into account the military-political situation in the region, the existence of a real threat to peace and security in the region, form a common space of defense and security.

The Russian Federation ensures the defense and security of the Republic of South Ossetia, including the protection of the state border of the Republic of South Ossetia. For this purpose, separate subdivisions of the Armed Forces and security agencies of the

¹³⁰ Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on Alliance and Integration, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4819>.

Republic of South Ossetia are included in the Armed Forces and security agencies of the Russian Federation by agreement of the Contracting Parties.

The procedure for the entry of individual units of the Armed Forces and security agencies of the Republic of South Ossetia into the Armed Forces and security agencies of the Russian Federation, the procedure for their functioning, use and support are determined by a separate agreement, which the Contracting Parties undertake to conclude no later than 6 months from the date of entry into force of this Treaty¹³¹.

If one of the Contracting Parties is subjected to aggression (armed attack) by any state, group of states or illegal armed formations, this will be considered as aggression (armed attack) against the other Contracting Party.

Article three cites: free crossing of the Russian-South Ossetian state border is carried out subject to restrictions imposed for security reasons.

Activities related to the implementation of paragraph 1 of this Article, and the timing of their implementation shall be determined by a separate agreement, which the Contracting Parties undertake to conclude no later than 6 months from the date of entry into force of this Agreement¹³².

Therefore, analysing just this first part of this treaty, it is possible to understand how deep Russia will influence Tskhinvali. Article 1 underlines that Russia and South Ossetia will have to try to find a common internal policy and to cooperate with each other. Furthermore, it seems that Moscow wants to mediate between Georgia and South Ossetia, helping secure the region.

In article 2, it is undeniable that Russia wants to be the guarantor of South Ossetia, as happened in Abkhazia, with the deployment of numerous armed troops in the Republic, which along with national forces will help border control and will prevent further aggressions from external enemies.

¹³¹ Ibid. 115

¹³² Ibid. 115

3.4 - A GLIMPSE OF SOUTH OSSETIA

Present-day South Ossetia holds almost no value for Moscow, except as a military base close to the heart of Georgia. The Kremlin has rebuffed overtures from Tskhinvali to hold a referendum on joining the Russian Federation. The Ossetians want union more than the Russians do. Here we see the strategic bind Moscow has gotten itself into: the more it exerts control over these small territories, the more it loses a much more important asset — influence over Georgia as a whole¹³³.

The modern history of South Ossetia is a tragic one in which a generally peaceful region was first dragged into an unnecessary war with Georgia in the 1990s, then became the centre of the Georgian-Russian conflict of 2008. Since then it has been granted what has been described as “unwanted independence,” which in practice means isolation, economic depression, and de facto Russian military annexation. On a personal level, this isolation hurts Ossetians as much or even more than Georgians. Many mixed Georgian-Ossetian families have been divided. The South Ossetian economy has withered, deprived of its traditional economic links with neighbouring Georgian towns¹³⁴.

Since August War, South Ossetia has been cut off from the rest of the world, way more than Abkhazia. International recognition by just few states it is useless and except the International Committee of the Red Cross, no international organisations have had permanent presence in the Republic. Additionally, the so-called Administrative Boundary Line, which is the border between Tbilisi’s and Tskhinvali’s territories is more closed than the one in Abkhazia.

The region’s misfortune is highlighted by a drastic demographic decline. The last Soviet census of 1989 recorded the population of South Ossetia as being 98,000, of whom 65,232 were Ossetians and 28,544 Georgians. In 2015 the population of South Ossetia was officially recorded as 53,438, including just under 4,000 ethnic Georgians, most of them in the town of Akhagori (Leningor)¹³⁵. In recent years it is estimated that there are

¹³³ De Waal, T. *Abkhazia and the Danger of “Ossetianization”*, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/07/16/abkhazia-and-danger-of-ossetianization-pub-79527>.

¹³⁴ De Waal, T. *South Ossetia Today*, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/06/11/south-ossetia-today-pub-80788>.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 134

roughly 39,000 inhabitants. What is certain is that much of South Ossetia's economic and political life is run out of the North Ossetian capital, Vladikavkaz¹³⁶.

As concern the political life, South Ossetia is a closed semi-authoritarian society with few freedoms. It lacks the independent civil society organizations and media outlets that can be found in Abkhazia. One of the few independent journalists, Irina Kelekhsayeva, has been harassed for reporting on alleged corruption. The region has competitive elections, but they take place between a small pool of candidates, all of whom take a very similar stance on Russia and Georgia. In April 2017, Anatoly Bibilov, a military veteran, became South Ossetia's fourth de facto president, replacing former KGB-chief Leonid Tibilov¹³⁷.

South Ossetia has very limited government capacity and much of its legislation and decision-making originate in Moscow. A leaked cache of emails from the office of Kremlin "curator" Surkov revealed that Russian government agencies had formed 13 working groups drafting bills to be adopted by the parliament in Tskhinvali. In 2015, this arrangement became more formal as South Ossetia signed a "Treaty on Alliance and Integration" which officially fused many government competencies with Russia. South Ossetia has shown no interest in pursuing wider diplomatic recognition beyond Russia since 2008¹³⁸.

On October 19, 2015, the press secretary of South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov revealed that he had raised the idea of a referendum on union with Russia in a meeting with Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov¹³⁹. It is so small that its residents are not in control of its own destiny. But, given a choice, many South Ossetians would welcome the chance of a union with the much bigger republic of North Ossetia on the other side of the Caucasus to form a single republic of "Alania" inside Russia¹⁴⁰. The new Russian legislation (2014), allowing regions of another country to seek to join the Russian

¹³⁶ Ibid. 134

¹³⁷ Ibid. 134

¹³⁸ Ibid. 134

¹³⁹ Ibid. 134

¹⁴⁰ De Waal, T. *South Ossetian Scenarios*, available at: <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/55453>.

Federation, gives Moscow leverage over several regions. Georgians are worried that South Ossetia could be one of these regions¹⁴¹.

In 2017, South Ossetians had to content themselves with a more symbolic change, approving the change of the territory's name to "Republic of South Ossetia–State of Alania." After all, South Ossetia wants union with Russia more than Russia itself does. The region's few economic assets and its tiny population evidently make it useful to Moscow mainly as a military and diplomatic pawn in a wider game. Moscow has made this clear by generally making major announcements on South Ossetia and Abkhazia supposedly in reaction to moves made on Georgia by the EU and United States. For example, the declaration on the recognition of independence of the two regions in August 2008 explicitly mentioned Kosovo; the two treaties of 2015 that followed the European Parliament's ratification of the EU's Association Agreement with Georgia; the ratification of a merger of the Russian and South Ossetian armed forces was timed to follow the sale of Javelin missiles to Georgia by the United States. It is evident that the status quo suits Moscow, and there is no interest in going further towards formal union with South Ossetia. While the outright annexation of Crimea may have delivered a domestic triumph for President Putin, and therefore an international price deemed worth paying, South Ossetia is a much less strategic territory and less popular cause. It is undeniable that Russia is aware it would lose far more giving up on a valuable leverage and receiving greater international condemnation, by annexing South Ossetia's territory *de jure* rather than *de facto*¹⁴².

South Ossetia used to earn its revenue primarily from selling agricultural products in Georgia, and from being a conduit route between Georgia and Russia. Both these options have been shut down since 2008. The local economy is extremely small, relying on a few businesses producing mineral water, fruit, or meat products. On the other hand, the region is almost entirely dependent on Russian financial support. In 2018 the budget was fixed at 7.672 billion roubles (106 million euros), of which 86 percent (6.592 million roubles) came directly from Russia. Even some of the locally generated income in the

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 140

¹⁴² Ibid. 134

budget comes indirectly from Russia, due to taxes on the local subsidiaries of the Russian companies Gazprom and Megafon¹⁴³.

3.5 - TSKHINVALI LINKS WITH GEORGIA

Despite the closed border line, some links with Georgia remain. Inside Georgia, inter-ethnic Georgian-Ossetian relations are generally better than between Georgians and Abkhaz. According to Georgia's 2014 census there were 14,400 Ossetians living in Georgia proper, mainly in the Kakheti and Shida Kartli regions. This is down from 98,000 (excluding South Ossetia) in 1989. Many Ossetians left Georgia during Gamsakhurdia years because of discrimination. More recently, according to a 2009 European Centre for Minority Issues report, the "recent decrease in the Ossetian population is largely connected with migration to Russia caused by difficult social conditions rather than ethnic discrimination or oppression. Essentially the issue is one of difficult rural conditions; it is from the villages that most out-migration has occurred, generally to North Ossetia." The report notes that many Ossetians who remain have been assimilated into Georgian society. Inter-marriage has also contributed to assimilation. With regard to South Ossetia itself, the example of the years 1992-2004 raises the question of whether, as then, people-to-people relations would resume if the border were to re-open despite the experience of 2008 and the strong anti-Georgian propaganda message widespread by South Ossetian authorities. A resumption of cross-border trade would instantly provide an incentive for the two communities to collaborate—possibly one reason that it is being restricted. Cross-border traffic by vehicles is allowed at the small town of Akhagori, of which Tbilisi government lost control merely in 2008. Here, according to an International Crisis Group report, there is a strong appetite for collaboration: "In 2017, commerce boomed: long queues of trucks were common, particularly during the summer harvest. An average of twenty per day were passing through the checkpoint to deliver goods from Tbilisi to South Ossetian markets, which have no other source of affordable food. Georgian comestibles cost two or three times more in South Ossetia than at Tbilisi markets, but they are still up

¹⁴³ Ibid. 134

to five times cheaper than Russian imports.” At one point, the South Ossetian authorities tried to place restrictions on cargoes, but they backed down¹⁴⁴.

South Ossetia would also be opened up if Tbilisi and Moscow were to start implementing a deal on transport corridors agreed in 2011 as a condition for Georgia lifting its veto on Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization. The deal, negotiated by Swiss diplomats, stipulated that three land corridors would operate between Russia and Georgia, two of them crossing the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (which are not named in the agreement, the locations being only indicated by GPS coordinates.) The cargos on the trucks are to be sealed by an international company, now confirmed as the Swiss firm SGS, and monitored electronically on their journey. The opening of the new corridors would obviate the need to rely on what is currently the only working Georgian-Russian border crossing at Upper Lars, which is often closed for four or five months of the year because of bad weather. It would increase trade across the mountains, giving an economic boost not just to Georgia and Russia, but to Armenia—for whom this is the main land route to the north—and eastern Turkey as well. The Armenian government and Russian businesses have been lobbying hard for the deal. However, the deal is unpopular in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They are not acknowledged as partners in it, even though it would open borders and provide indirect income and opportunities for more trade at a later point. Former South Ossetian leader Anatoly Bibilov insisted that South Ossetia should have equal partnership rights, something clearly unacceptable in Tbilisi¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 134

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 134

CHAPTER 4

WIND OF CHANGE

4.1 - THE 2012 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Speaking about 2012, the situation changed. Despite scepticism coming from both sides, relations between Russia and Georgia were normalizing: Grigory Karasin (Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs) was holding regular meetings with the Georgian Prime Minister's Special Representative in Relations with Russia Zurab Abashidze. In addition, Georgian goods were back into Russian markets and Russian tourism increased by 40%. The Russian scientific and cultural community intensified exchanges with the Georgian one, and the new elected Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili offered assistance to Moscow in providing security during the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. In 2013, President Putin said that the efficiency of a joint terrorism counteraction may be the first step towards restoring visa-free regime between the two countries¹⁴⁶.

It has taken more than four years to open the possibility to a normalization of the relationships between the two States, damaged by the 2008 August War and Saakashvili attitude towards Russia. The Kremlin thought that any agreement with Mikhail Saakashvili was impossible also because in the Russian's leadership eyes, he became famous for failing to keep his word: for instance, when he shelled Tskhinvali hours after announcing a unilateral ceasefire on Georgian TV¹⁴⁷.

External actors were confident about the democratic trend of the elections in Georgia. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe welcomed the electoral reforms of 2011 as a "step forward" for the Georgian political system, thanks to the lowered threshold of 5 percent from the previous 7 percent. The most significant innovation is represented by the fact that every party that clears the threshold will automatically receive six seats, even if the actual votes would translate into fewer mandates. This correction is even more important since, according to the reformed

¹⁴⁶ Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18319>.

¹⁴⁷ Silaev, N., & Sushentsov, A. (2014). Russia's View of Its Relations with Georgia after the 2012 Elections: Implications for Regional Stability. *Connections*, 14(1), 65-86. Retrieved September 5, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26326386>.

Georgian Constitution, “the number of the members of Parliamentary Factions shall be no less than six” and thus every party will have the opportunity to constitute its own faction and become more involved in the legislative procedures¹⁴⁸.

A new turning point in the distension between the two nations occurred in the Autumn 2012, when there was a political change in Georgia. On 1st October 2012, the opposition coalition Georgian Dream led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili won the parliamentary elections with 55% of votes¹⁴⁹. After some meetings, the outgoing president Saakashvili agreed to offer to Ivanishvili the position of Prime Minister by January 2014¹⁵⁰.

Ivanishvili managed to achieve something that nobody could before him: he was able to bring together all the opposition and was well respected in the whole country¹⁵¹. Some key governmental and parliamentary spots were taken by the Republican party and the Free Democrats party, both driven by Westernization and Euro-Atlantic integration feelings. This could have caused discrepancies between what Georgians wanted and what it would have really happened: pre-elections polls showed that voters for Georgian Dream were hardly unanimous in support for NATO, and they did not want to send soldiers in Afghanistan. Additionally, 32% of the voters of the opposition coalition saw NATO as an aggressive bloc, 53% agreed that Georgia and NATO interests diverge and 88% said that Georgia should not be sending soldiers to Afghanistan¹⁵². Georgian people were hoping in an improvement of the relations between Russia and Georgia, and probably because of this the percentage of people against actions with NATO was so high. Therefore, Ivanishvili’s victory spawned inflated expectations about the country’s socio-economic development and the normalization of Russo-Georgian relationships¹⁵³. A good starting point of the new Georgian leadership in its relations with Russia was that a former negative background did not exist. Mikhail Saakashvili threw away any possibility of a

¹⁴⁸ Filetti, A. *Georgia’s Parliamentary elections: moving toward a fourth democratic phase?* Available at: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12552-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2012-8-22-art-12552.html>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 147

¹⁵⁰ Kakachia, K. *Georgia’s Parliamentary Elections: the start of a peaceful transfer of power?* Available at: http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm_230_Kakachia_Sept2012.pdf.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 147

¹⁵² Ibid. 147

¹⁵³ Ibid. 147

dialogue with Moscow and, considering the importance of the “Russian question” to the Georgian audience, people wanted a representative more capable of reconciling with Russia than the forerunner¹⁵⁴.

On the one hand, Saakashvili has employed impressive policies, modernized bureaucracy, eliminated petty corruption and tackled organized crime. However, on the other hand, his economic policies were catastrophic for Georgian economy, bringing unemployment to a rate of 34%. Furthermore, besides the Russian question, has become infamous the episodes of violence which occurred in Georgian detention structures during his government¹⁵⁵. Other sad features of his government were that he exploited his power to leverage the media, and the brutality in quelling protests¹⁵⁶.

All these events, plus the Russian question and the inability to regain the lost territories, brought to his defeat in the elections of 2012.

This was the first time in 20 years that Georgia, or indeed any of its post-Soviet neighbours, has seen political change through the ballot box rather than from crowds on the streets, and Georgia should be congratulated for that. It should be clear that this wasn't an election fought by European rules: Saakashvili and his government did everything in their power to ensure a victory, deploying state resources and a loyal media to buttress support for the ruling party¹⁵⁷.

4.2 - THE EVOLVING SITUATION IN THE REGION AFTER 2012

While the election was an important milestone in building Georgia's democratic credentials against the backdrop of a deteriorating international environment, and the West's lukewarm attitude to Georgia, it was also the key in determining whether the country could found new energy in its long-standing quest for political and economic reforms and Western orientation. Simply put, this election could determine the future of

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 147

¹⁵⁵ De Waal, T. *Georgia is Having a Democratic Counterrevolution*, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2012/10/02/georgia-is-having-democratic-counterrevolution-pub-49562>.

¹⁵⁶ Ferrari, A. *La vittoria del sogno georgiano*, available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-vittoria-del-sogno-georgiano-7031>.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 145

Georgia's orientation, and with it, the broader region's trajectory. It is clear that Georgia's economic problems, especially unemployment and issues caused by the devaluation of the currency, dominate internal political and economic dynamics. The devaluation led to an increase in prices and sharply declining purchasing power of the population, which has caused major concerns. Continuous economic problems in key markets for Georgian products and key sources for remittances, including Russia, Greece, Ukraine and Turkey, made short-term prospects for economic development and growth bleak. There were no signs on the horizon that would indicate any significant increase of foreign direct investments, and consequently, no expectations on major improvements of the employment picture. These economic problems pushed all other issues, even those important for the national security of Georgia, to the periphery of popular interest. On the external front, Georgia's neighbourhood was more convoluted than before, as the country was squeezed between turmoil in Turkey, an aggressive Russia, the conflict in Ukraine, the violence engulfing the Middle East and south-eastern Turkey, the Turkish-Russian rollercoaster, and the escalating Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict¹⁵⁸.

The continued occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russian military forces and periodic pressure from Russia – including military exercises and deployment of modern weapons systems on sovereign Georgian territory– remained a key external threat for the country. The assertiveness of Russia in Syria and in its evolving relationship with Turkey, as well as the changing role of Iran, are leading to a transformation of the global and regional security context. The growing global and regional influence of the radical ideas of ISIS are causing concern for the areas populated by Georgian Muslims, with some evidence of infiltration by ISIS influence. All these require conceptualization of the risk factors and elaboration of proper strategies to address them. On a more positive note, the Association Agreement with the EU entered into full force on July 1, 2016. While the visa liberalization process has been delayed due to EU internal procedures as well as problems, it was eventually activated on March 28, 2017. The free trade agreement with the EU (DCFTA) is also active and could help to increase exports to non-traditional export countries for Georgia in Europe. The DCFTA and visa liberalization could, in the longer term, make Georgia more attractive for citizens in the

¹⁵⁸ Cornell, S., Tsereteli, M., Elkund, P. *Under the Radar: Georgia's October 2016 Elections*, available at: <http://silkroadstudies.org/resources/1610Georgia-Final.pdf>.

breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Similarly, the economic crisis in Russia opens an opportunity for improved dialogue between Tbilisi and the breakaway regions. It is also positive that Georgians feel freer and less afraid than four years ago¹⁵⁹.

Georgia has made significant strides toward democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration in recent years, epitomized by the successful democratic transfers of power following the October 2012 parliamentary elections and the October 2013 presidential contest. However, consolidating Georgia's democratic gains remains a work in progress as important democratic reforms have stalled due to internal political dynamics and increased meddling from the Russian Federation. A culture of constructive, issue-based political negotiation has not yet taken root in the 2012-2016 parliament or in local governments. Currently, political debate in Georgia tends to focus more on polemics than facts and evidence. Legislative agendas are often driven by personalities rather than policy platforms or constituent priorities. Many Georgian elected officials at the national and local level are still learning how to balance their obligations to their party, their institutions and their constituents¹⁶⁰.

A second question concerns Ivanishvili's foreign policy priorities. In statements given during the election campaign, Ivanishvili generally adheres to the course taken by the UNM government and advocates continued integration into NATO and the EU, while also arguing for improved relations with Russia. However, few details have been presented as to how these combined objectives are to be fulfilled. The question of NATO membership has been a major problem in Georgia–Russia relations and it is difficult to see how Ivanishvili would, as he has said, convince Russia that Georgian membership will not constitute a threat. However, Georgia's NATO membership has remained a distant objective since the 2008 war and is hence not presently an immediate Russian concern. Improving relations with Russia will likely imply a more difficult balancing act. Initial statements from Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs make no secret that Moscow is happy with the election result. However, Ivanishvili will be vulnerable domestically to any accusation, which the UNM will likely

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 147

¹⁶⁰ GEORGIA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OCTOBER 8 AND OCTOBER 30, 2016 - The Final Report of IRI's Long-Term Observation Mission, available at: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_georgia_final_election_report.pdf.

not hesitate to put forward, of making concessions to Russia in the name of improved relations. While initial foreign policy gains in this relationship could potentially involve relaxed visa requirements or a partial lifting of the embargo Russia imposes on Georgian exports since 2006, any concessions Ivanishvili's government would be willing to make in exchange would likely vindicate those who believe that he is secretly fronting for Moscow. In this perspective, compromises over the most sensitive issue between the two states, the continued Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Russia's recognition of these entities as independent states, are highly unlikely under any Georgian government. Ivanishvili has also hinted that he plans to scale down the previous government's rhetoric regarding Georgia's importance on a global level and plans to focus on Georgia's role as a regional player with constructive relations with all its neighbours. While this objective can perhaps be viewed as more realistic than Saakashvili's grand declarations of Georgia's geopolitical importance, it obscures the fact that Georgia's continued integration with NATO and the EU will unavoidably be conceived in geopolitical terms, not least by its northern neighbour. Hence, it seems unlikely that Georgia's current foreign policy would undergo any major alterations under the leadership of GD and Ivanishvili. Finally, it should be noted that the level of democracy in Georgia is far from the only obstacle the country has so far encountered in its attempt to become an accepted member of the Western community. Enthusiasm among NATO members toward Georgia as a prospective member is luke-warm at best and the issue will continue to be considered in a much larger geopolitical perspective where their relations to Russia are weighed in. The EU offers technical prospects for increased integration in the form of facilitated visa procedures and a DCFTA, but membership for Georgia is not in the cards even in a long-term perspective. The outlook is therefore not so predictable, and Georgia's continued Western orientation to a significant extent depends on the continued perception among Georgia's political elite and public that the West is the only acceptable foreign policy choice¹⁶¹.

One common feature of the October 2012 elections and the subsequent four years of the new administration has been the radical polarization of two political forces: UNM

¹⁶¹ Nilsson, N. *International Implications of Georgia's Parliamentary Elections*, available at: <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CAD-43-17-20.pdf>.

and the Georgian Dream Coalition. One indicator of this strong polarization built on antipathy is that, according to the opinion polls of June 2016, 21% of the respondents would never vote for UNM, whereas 19% would never vote for GD¹⁶².

Another aspect of the government's narrative about Georgia's success is that the UNM constitutes the only political power capable of securing a continuation of the process of reforming Georgia as a state, as well as guaranteeing its continued Western orientation. During the election campaign, accusations have frequently been levelled against GD leader Bidzina Ivanishvili and the opposition of not only secretly supporting Moscow's interests in Georgia, but also of attempting to bring the country back to its past of corruption, criminality, and conflict. In addition to Ivanishvili's and GD's struggle to present themselves to the Georgian public as a credible alternative to the UNM, which apparently turned out to be successful, the parallel struggle for international credibility between the competing parties has also been a clear feature of the election process. Ivanishvili's significant personal wealth has allowed GD to match the Georgian government's long-standing international lobbying efforts, especially in Washington DC. Thus, GD has promoted its competing narrative about developments in Georgia and made an important point of attacking Saakashvili and the UNM on exactly their democratic shortcomings to a U.S. political audience. Against this backdrop, the parliamentary elections and their aftermath are potentially of paramount importance to Georgia's future standing with its Western partners, as well as its opportunities for further integration with European and transatlantic institutions. The fact that the elections obtained a largely positive evaluation in preliminary observer statements, and that the opposition actually won by a significant margin, will likely alleviate many concerns voiced about an increasingly authoritarian Georgia. By the same token, the fact that Saakashvili conceded defeat and appears ready to cooperate in transferring power to a GD-appointed government is clearly a positive signal to those fearing a protracted confrontation between the UNM and GD over the election results¹⁶³.

¹⁶² *Parliamentary elections in Georgia*, available at: <https://www.laender-analysen.de/cad/pdf/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest89.pdf>.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* 161

4.3 - THE 2016 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

According to IRI's (International Republican Institute) public opinion research in 2015, the percentage of citizens who think that Georgia is heading in the right direction dropped to a five-year low of 25 percent in February 2015, down from a high of 63 percent following the 2012 parliamentary elections. IRI's April 2016 poll revealed that 70 percent of Georgians believe their country is headed in the wrong direction, a 15 percent increase from 2015.

IRI's data also indicates that 42 percent of Georgians feel that the employment situation has worsened, and approval of parliament has dropped from 81 percent to 49 percent in the last two years. Polls show that Georgians continue to have extremely favourable attitudes towards Western integration: 79 percent support Georgian membership of NATO, and 85 percent support joining the EU. This widespread support may also be motivated by fears of a Russian aggression, as 71 percent of Georgians view Russia as the country's greatest threat¹⁶⁴.

According to the June 2016 opinion polls by NDI/CRRC¹⁶⁵, the number of voters who cannot identify themselves with any party has been increasing steadily since the previous parliamentary elections in 2012. In March 2016, 61% of the Georgian population was undecided about who they would vote if parliamentary elections were to be held the next day. Only approximately 34% were decided on their votes. Although the number of decided voters gradually increased since August 2015, from 28% to 38%, the share of undecided voters has been more stable, at approximately 60% over the same period. More importantly, half of the likely voters were still undecided in June 2016. By comparison, in August 2012, less than two months before the parliamentary elections, only approximately 25% were uncertain about their choice.

For foreign policy, it can be argued that decided voters are slightly more pro-Western and that undecided voters are slightly more pro-Russian and/or more critical towards the stated pro-Western goals. For example, more decided voters than undecided voters approved of the Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU and NATO.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 160

¹⁶⁵ National Democratic Institute and Caucasus Resource Research Centers.

Additionally, more decided voters (58%) than undecided voters (49%) agree that Georgia will benefit more from EU and NATO membership. Although the majority of both decided and undecided voters believe that pro-Western policy should be combined with good relations with Russia, more decided voters think that Georgia's foreign policy should be proWestern (17% vs. 11%). For pro-Russian feelings, 29% of the decided voters and 30% of the undecided voters believe that Georgia would benefit more from abandoning the EU and NATO in favor of better relations with Russia. Furthermore, almost an equal share, one-fifth of both decided and undecided voters, believes that Georgia should be more pro-Russian with good relations with the EU and NATO. A small share of voters (both decided and undecided) also believes that Georgia should be pro-Russian¹⁶⁶.

Despite running independently from its more experienced former and current coalition members, and against a backdrop of mounting public frustrations, Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GDDG) secured a strong electoral victory. In the first round, GDDG won 48.7 percent of the popular vote with 51.6 percent turnout. The United National Movement (UNM) came in second with 27.1 percent of the vote, while the Alliance of Patriots (AOP) barely cleared the 5 percent threshold with 5.01 percent. No other parties gained sufficient votes to enter parliament on the party list. GDDG won 44 of the 77 party list seats, while UNM won 27 and AOP won six. GDDG won 23 out of 73 majoritarian seats during the first round. The remaining 50 districts proceeded to a second round of elections since no candidate reached 50 percent plus one vote. These districts held runoff contests on October 30, and GDDG won 48 of 50 seats. The remaining two seats were won by a nominally independent candidate and a member of the Industrialists party, both of whom would have likely partnered with GDDG. GDDG now controls 115 of 150 total seats in parliament. This represents 76.7 percent of parliament and will provide GDDG with a constitutional majority through the 2020 parliamentary election¹⁶⁷.

Although having made a relatively strong showing, none of the remaining third parties managed to cross the 5% threshold. Neither did the other former coalition parties, including the Free Democrats and the Republicans, among the most Pro-Western parties

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 160

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 160

in Georgian politics. The resignation of the former party leader of the Republicans and outgoing Speaker of the Parliament, Davit Usupashvili is considered a big loss. Usupashvili has been widely credited for bringing the parliament back as a vital political institution in Georgian politics. Additionally, Irakli Alasania, now former leader of the Free Democrats, has announced that he will be leaving the political scene. Alasania was the former UN ambassador and special representative in talks with breakaway Abkhazia and has represented a diplomatic and rational voice in Georgian politics. The decision of both these parties to run separately in the elections proved counterproductive, as creating a power bloc would have significantly increased their chances of crossing the threshold. Surprisingly, the 2016 election campaign was not entirely dominated by the rivalry between multibillionaire and GD founder Bidzina Ivanishvili (GD) and Georgia's former president, newly resigned governor of Odessa in Ukraine, Mikhail Saakashvili (UNM). Instead, it featured a plurality of politicians. Re-elected Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili (GD) – recognised as a much-needed political bridge-builder who has lessened political tensions in Georgia – seems to enjoy significant popularity at home and abroad (De Waal 2016). Arguably, Kvirikashvili is more independent than his predecessors and more capable of moving the premiership further away from the backstage control of Ivanishvili. In that case, he would be the first prime minister to have achieved this after Ivanishvili himself withdrew from that post in 2013, allegedly only to continue to oversee the premiership from behind the scenes¹⁶⁸.

4.4 - THE UNCERTAIN POST-ELECTIONS SCENARIO

As it seems, GD has secured the constitutional majority, resulting in more uncertainties over political institutions because Georgia has witnessed an excess of power during UNM rule. This alone seems dangerous, considering the lack of institutional barriers for limiting the overuse of power. Furthermore, although it is perhaps

¹⁶⁸ *Georgia elections: Georgian Dream still at the helm*, available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07974?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=georgia+elections+2016+caucasus&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dgeorgia%2Belections%2B2016%2Bcaucasus%26acc%3Doff%26wc%3Don%26fc%3Doff%26group%3Dnone&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_SYC-5462%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A8d248557a98ff63003013bd26cc08c27&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

unsurprising in the modern world, it is nevertheless striking that, after elections which resulted in a parliament in which only approximately 40% of the population is represented, a case could be made for a lack of legitimacy and a democratic deficit. The 2016 parliamentary elections in Georgia have once more shown the role of television as the main medium with the voters. As a result, strong financial support and simple messages targeting a wide audience should not be underestimated. Overall, the picture is more diverse in 2016 than it was in 2012 in terms of both the number of participating entities and the actual results. However, this diversity is not sufficiently reflected in the Parliament, because only 3 out of the 26 participating parties passed the 5% threshold. This suggests the need for lowering the threshold on the one hand, and a better-targeted campaign of the “other” parties on the other hand, especially pro-Western ones. As the 2016 parliamentary elections in Georgia have shown, there is an apparent need for more diversity and a third alternative that differs from UNM and GD. However, the only force that managed to use this window of opportunity (not counting the two previously mentioned above) was the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots. Therefore, it is possible that pro-Western policies will be challenged to a greater extent than before in the future. While GD is rejoicing in its victory, it should ensure that the undecided voters do not become a reason for deeper frustration and crisis. Keeping in mind that the majority of voters are not represented in the parliament, the silent voice of the abstainers should be given more attention in the coming years¹⁶⁹.

One notable aspect of the 2016 election campaign was the limited discussion of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While Georgian politicians again criticized Russia for conducting military exercises in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2016 and for holding elections for the State Duma inside the territories in September, few of the parties that participated in the Georgian elections presented serious platforms on the issue. Opinion polls from 2015 found that territorial integrity remained high on the list of Georgia’s most pressing issues but was no longer among the top three: those were jobs, inflation, and poverty. With the deepening of bilateral relations in the economic, security and judicial spheres between Moscow on one hand, and Sukhumi and Tskhinvali on the other, Georgia appears to be dealing with a less benign Russian foreign policy than in the

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 150

past three years. Continued Russian borderization (the erection and movement of border fences) of the administrative line between South Ossetia and Georgia add to this impression. Moreover, the prospects for a South Ossetian referendum on accession to Russia, due to be held in 2016 but postponed till 2017, complicated matters further. All these factors seem to have caused a sense of paralysis in the Georgian government as regards finding appropriate responses or developing a clear plan for conflict resolution.

Yet, despite the lack of a vision for resolving the conflicts, the former coalition government worked hard to restore relations with Russia. From 2013 onwards, they managed to reduce hostility as well as ensuring the resumption of economic ties, so crucial to the Georgian economy. This continues to be a balancing act, ready to be exploited by the opposition if any of the government's moves might be interpreted as giving concessions to Russia. On the whole, in order to maintain a level of influence in the breakaway territories, the new government is likely to continue to pursue soft incentives, such as offering free healthcare and education in Georgia to the populations there. Moreover, the expected EU agreement on visa-free travel in the Schengen area and other benefits of Georgia's European agenda will be made available to Abkhazians and South Ossetians, as was made clear by Kvirikashvili in his speech to the UN Assembly in September 2016. Measures like these might become even more important as the two breakaway territories are increasingly subjected to Russian efforts aimed at augmenting its presence with more soft-power resources, like closer integration with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in the case of Abkhazia; or as in South Ossetia, where there are high expectations that living standards will improve significantly under the new alliance and integration treaty with Russia (Caucasian Knot 2015). The West may see the EEU as a Russian attempt to provide an alternative to the EU in the post-Soviet space – but with the breakaway territories, it is Georgia and the EU that now find themselves challenged to present an attractive alternative. To ensure continued state building, democratic development, and chances of progress on South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia's Western friends will have to begin delivering on their promises, like the EU visa liberalization agreement¹⁷⁰. As of this writing, the agreement has been approved.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 156

4.5 - THE 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

On October 28th, 2018 Georgia held its seventh presidential elections since its independence in 1990. Despite a quite hostile electoral campaign and more than 25 registered candidates, neither of the front-runners was able to win enough votes to secure victory in the first round. Thus, on November 28th, Georgians proceeded to the polls in a historically unprecedented second round of elections¹⁷¹, in the last direct presidential elections before the country fully switches to a parliamentary system.

Salome Zurbishvili, an independent candidate endorsed by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, won the election by securing 59 percent of the vote against opponent Grigol Vashadze from United National Movement (UNM) who received 40 percent. Zurbishvili received the largest number of votes in the first election round on October 28 but did not reach the 50 percent threshold needed to win. Observers assessed that elections were largely competitive but not fair. Some irregularities and incidents occurred during the voting; however, they did not seriously affect the outcome¹⁷².

Zurbishvili is the fifth president of Georgia (her predecessors were Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, Mikhail Saakashvili and Giorgi Margvelashvili), and the first female head of state in the entire Southern Caucasus. She is also the last Georgian president who has been elected in a general election; as a result of constitutional changes, starting from 2023 the country's president will be chosen by a 300-person Electoral College, composed of all the country's parliamentary deputies and representatives of local governments¹⁷³.

Like her opponent, Zurbishvili has substantial foreign policy experience, having served as France's ambassador to Tbilisi as well as Georgia's foreign minister. It is unlikely that foreign policy under the new president-elect will differ from that of Georgian Dream. In her first post-election address, Zurbishvili confirmed Georgia's decisive

¹⁷¹ Machavariani, M. *Presidential elections of 2018 in Georgia and its implications*, available at: <http://caspianet.eu/2019/01/16/presidential-elections-of-2018-in-georgia-and-its-implications/>.

¹⁷² Konarzewska, N. *Georgia's Last Direct Presidential Elections*, available at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13552-georgias-last-direct-presidential-elections.html>.

¹⁷³ The Center for Eastern Studies, available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-11-29/salome-zurbishvili-georgias-new-president>.

course towards integration with NATO and the EU. She also criticized Russia's continually aggressive and provocative behaviour toward Georgia.

Similarly to campaigning before the 2016 parliamentary elections, this year's election campaign was extremely harsh and divisive. It revealed a deep polarization in the society and media over the irreconcilable political competition between GD and its major political opponent, the UNM. Both parties resorted to negative and highly polarizing campaigning to attract votes and focused their campaigns on personalities rather than on programs. The election campaign was replete with black PR, leaked audiotapes, allegations of corruption and murder – all aiming to discredit the opponent and appealing to the most extreme emotions rather than promoting the candidates. The smear campaign completely overshadowed the debate about the important economic and policy concerns that Georgia is currently facing. While this strategy is convenient for political parties, it is unhelpful to voters and turn elections into emotion-fuelled plebiscites rather than an actual competition based on programs¹⁷⁴.

The negative campaigning intensified after the first round when the major opponents scored almost identical numbers of votes. Zurabishvili was able to garner 615,572 votes – nearly a quarter of a million less than the ruling party received in the last parliamentary elections. The major opposition candidate, the UNM's Vashadze, came a close second and received 601,224 votes, which exceeded the UNM's result in the last parliamentary elections. This result came as a surprise to the ruling party, which was convinced that the fragmented and weakened opposition would not pose a substantial challenge. This contributed to even fiercer and more polarizing campaigning by the two major opponents before the run-off. The ruling party engaged in a new black PR campaign aimed at their main political opponent, including new billboards and videos. The UNM responded with negative coverage in friendly media outlets¹⁷⁵.

Most observers noted that the elections were not fair and that the authorities resorted to undemocratic methods to attract voters. The most notable case took place just before the second round, when Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze promised that the state was ready to help Georgians who were unable to pay off their bank loans. The total

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 162

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 162

number of people who were behind on their debt payments is estimated to 700,000, and the combined value of toxic debts amounts to 1.5 billion lari (approximately US\$ 564 million). Debt relief would come through the Kartu Foundation, established by GD's founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili. This unexpected move sparked accusations in Georgia and beyond that the ruling party employed vote buying to gain an unfair advantage over the opposition candidate¹⁷⁶.

So far, the campaign has been almost exclusively negative and consisted of a series of mutual accusations between both main camps that intended to discredit the opponent. Instead of addressing any of the pressing issues for Georgian voters, like improving economic conditions or the delivery of public services, the main topic so far have been mutual accusations about the respective opponent's alleged pro-Russian attitudes and about which branch of the Russian secret services is allegedly controlling them. Besides obviously being the dominant topic of Georgian foreign and security policy, the never-ending Moscow blame game has become a compulsory show element of political campaigning. This ongoing political roller-coaster of extremes and personal power plays under the guise of democratic consolidation, may soon lead to a growing demand by Georgian citizens for a fundamental change in the political arena¹⁷⁷.

Despite this victory, GD is not in a strong position. The choice of Zurabishvili (who officially ran as an independent but was closely backed by GD) was emblematic of Ivanishvili's style of leadership, which has increasingly come to chafe the Georgian electorate. The multi-billionaire Ivanishvili, who served as Georgia's Prime Minister from October 2012 to November 2013 and is considered to wield enormous power behind the scenes ever since, made his official return to Georgian politics by reassuming leadership of GD in April 2018. Against the near-unanimous counsel of his advisers, who warned that Zurabishvili was a disliked figure likely to alienate voters, Ivanishvili insisted on her nomination. He became more closely linked to her as the campaign intensified

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 162

¹⁷⁷ Kiss, A. *Georgian Presidential Elections 2018: The show must go on*, Strategic Policy Institute, available at: https://stratpol.sk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Annamaria_Kiss_Geo-2018-Presidential-Elections-stratpol-FINAL.pdf.

following the close-run first round, even appearing on billboards without the candidate herself¹⁷⁸.

Over the past year, the popularity of Ivanishvili and his government have taken a beating. Repeated scandals, growing inequality, and environmental concerns have shaken public confidence in Ivanishvili's leadership: in a June 2018 poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute, a U.S. think tank and public opinion research group, 62 percent of the respondents said they believed the country was going in the wrong direction. Those polled indicated worsening poverty, growing corruption, and a failure of recent economic growth to provide trickle-down benefits, with only 3 percent assessing the economy as "good." Ivanishvili's vague promises to "improve the lives of Georgia's citizens" have largely rung hollow after six years of similar rhetoric¹⁷⁹.

4.6 - IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The elections primarily indicated just how weak GD has become. It is a testament to the party's political ineptitude that what should have been a perfunctory event was instead transformed into a major referendum on Ivanishvili and GD, or Saakashvili and UNM. Far from successes, 2018 was a year plagued by scandals for the GD administration. One resulted from the decision to send Special Forces to raid one of the city's most popular nightclubs on a Saturday night in May, ostensibly searching for drug dealers who, it emerged, had already been arrested beforehand. The resulting protests against the police conduct came to encompass large sections of Georgia's liberalized younger generation, including the LGBT community, often targeted by harassment. These protests were met by mass far-right counter protests, including groups displaying swastikas and giving the Nazi salute. Even larger in scale were the demonstrations led by a pair of grieving fathers, Malkhaz Machalikashvili and Zaza Saralidze, seeking answers regarding their slain sons. Machalikashvili's son died from injuries sustained in an ill-

¹⁷⁸ Hauer, N. *Georgian Politics: Awaiting Revitalization* (2019), available at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13559-georgian-politics-awaiting-revitalization.html>.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 168

explained December 2017 raid by Georgian Special Forces on their home in the Pankisi Valley. Saralidze's son was stabbed to death the same month by a fellow student in an incident whose legal resolution has been marred by nepotism. The two fathers have since gathered support and have camped in front of parliament since May, demanding transparency. Despite nine months of continuous protests, the GD administration has failed to deliver any further evidence of what occurred in either event, increasing the perceptions of Ivanishvili's unaccountability¹⁸⁰.

The campaign also served as a reminder of just how much Georgian politics are defined by two figures alone, much more than by parties or institutions. Ivanishvili and Saakashvili have formed a duality of Georgian politics for the past eight years; in this time, there have been few national figures even approaching their level of influence. In some ways, this reflects what some have dubbed a "messiah complex" that characterizes the Georgian populace's approach to their leadership. Much like Saakashvili and Ivanishvili at the start of their respective rule, Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who led the country through the collapse of the Soviet Union, was initially hailed as a national hero. Great hopes were also invested in his successor, former communist-era leader Eduard Shevardnadze, to halt and reverse the anarchy Georgia had descended into. Even the campaign rhetoric of the two current titans of Georgia's political landscape were focused mostly on each other rather than their own policies: GD lawmakers urged the populace to prevent the return of the "bloody Saakashvili regime," while UNM cited Ivanishvili's undoing of the achievements of their tenure. The two leading Georgian news channels, Imedi TV and Rustavi 2, were each rallied to the side of their patrons (GD for the former, UNM for the latter) to broadcast highly biased coverage for the entirety of the campaign. The primary messages from Ivanishvili and Saakashvili remains how, only they and their team, can deliver Georgia from stagnation¹⁸¹.

The 2018 Freedom House Nations in Transit report underlines the creeping setbacks in the democratic development of Georgia. A public opinion poll conducted by NDI and CRRC¹⁸² in June 2018 found that 62 per cent of Georgians think their country

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 168

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 168

¹⁸² National Democratic Institute and Caucasus Research Resource Center.

is mainly or definitely going in the wrong direction, while only 29 percent believe the contrary. Citizens are witnessing a deterioration of socio-economic conditions and are mostly concerned with jobs, poverty, and inflation. Another important concern is the perception of an unfair judiciary system, 69 percent of respondents think courts are in favour of some citizens over others. Still, support for the country joining NATO and EU remains extremely high. However, the uncertain membership perspective coupled with stagnant conflict resolution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and a high political polarisation, put the accountability of the ruling Georgian Dream in the forefront of the political discussion¹⁸³.

It seems that highly polarizing, negative election campaigns will not disappear from Georgia's political life anytime soon. Manufactured conflict produces political benefits for the main opponents, and parties will not abandon this strategy. It allows the ruling party to distract attention from the problems that the country is currently facing and helps to mobilize votes against the demonized opposition. In turn, negative campaigning helps UNM to stay relevant and win part of the undecided voters who are dissatisfied with GD rule. Despite GD's victory, the presidential elections showed that the ruling party's appeal, which capitalized on UNM's unpopularity and has been winning elections by a wide margin since 2012, is fading. GD had to resort to dubious tactics to retain political power even when facing a weakened and fragmented opposition. The upcoming parliamentary elections will be an even bigger challenge for the ruling party, since GD will have to fight to preserve its parliamentary majority for the third consecutive term. Georgian authorities face an important task in improving electoral standards and ensuring an eventual peaceful transfer of power¹⁸⁴.

If Georgian Dream would lose its majority in parliament in this year's elections (2020), this could paradoxically lead it to take a more conservative course by seeking support from conservative and ultra-nationalist groups, within and outside parliament, against a common adversary: UNM/EG¹⁸⁵. This may consolidate Georgian Dream's hold on power but will do little to address the socio-economic concerns of Georgian citizens,

¹⁸³ Ibid. 171

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. 178

¹⁸⁵ EG means European Georgia.

the reforms demanded by its main trading partner, the EU, and the threat of Russia's soft power in Georgia.

On foreign policy, a Georgian Dream-led nationalist-conservative government would likely maintain, and possibly further soften, its “pragmatic but principled approach” to Russia. This policy of normalizing relations with Russia has been a central tenet of Georgian Dream's foreign policy since 2012. As a result, the Georgian government has downplayed its rhetoric, while economic ties with Russia have improved. While it remains unlikely that a Georgian-Dream led nationalist-conservative government would make concessions regarding Georgia's Russian-occupied territories, such a government can be expected to become even less active in pursuing conflict-related issues internationally and bilaterally¹⁸⁶.

Domestically, a Georgian Dream-led nationalist-conservative coalition government would facilitate Russia's soft power policy in Georgia. The latest annual report of Georgia's State Security Service, the country's domestic intelligence agency, warned that foreign adversaries are encouraging anti-Western sentiments in Georgia and aim to polarize Georgian society. The number of Russian-funded NGOs and news outlets linked to Russia has increased in recent years. Xenophobic, ultra-nationalist groups, such as Georgian March, have organized several demonstrations over the past year, and have mounting ambitions. They appear to have the Georgian Dream government's tacit approval and have acted with impunity on several occasions¹⁸⁷.

Meanwhile, the 2020 elections coincide with the end of an era in EU-Georgia relations after Georgia recently obtained EU visa free travel and concluded an Association Agreement with the EU. With the potential benefits of the EU's Eastern Partnership exhausted, and new perspectives on further integration lacking, a lack of tangible, immediate benefits from the AA/DCFTA¹⁸⁸ could stall the legislative efforts of a Georgian Dream-led government to implement the reforms mandated by the EU¹⁸⁹.

¹⁸⁶ Wuite, C. *Georgian Politics in Anticipation of the 2020 Parliamentary* (2019), available at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13574-georgian-politics-in-anticipation-of-the-2020-parliamentary.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 162

¹⁸⁸ Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 162

The international community, concerned about the rise of pro-Russian and nationalist sentiment, will keenly watch the 2020 elections to see in which direction the country and its process of democratization and Euro-Atlantic and European Integration is heading¹⁹⁰.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 162

CHAPTER 5

THE IMPACT OF RUSSIAN TOURISM IN GEORGIA

History teaches us that, for Russia, the Caucasus region in general was not only the most difficult area to conquer, but also the most significant encounter with Asia. The famous writer and poet Aleksandr Puškin was already speaking about the Caucasus as a great land and spent kind words towards Georgia and its inhabitants during its travel in 1829, calling them cheerful, sociable and prideful¹⁹¹.

Georgia, even during Soviet times, has always been one of the favourite destinations of Russian tourists. Today, albeit the war in 2008 and Putin blockade in 2019, Georgia it is once again one of the top destinations of Russian people, despite its small size¹⁹².

Georgia is loved not only for its beautiful cities, but also because of its landscape, hiking destination, winter/summer resorts and, above all, its great food and wine.

Russian tourism has always meant a significant amount of income of the overall tourism sector in Georgia, supporting thousands of businesses and workers. The Russian embargo on travel to Georgia has drawn attention to the growing role that tourism plays in Georgia's economy, and how much Georgia stands to suffer from the loss of Russian tourists.

There are several reasons to believe that the recent embargo on Russian tourists flying to Georgia could have a noticeable impact on the Georgian economy. Russia is one of the largest sources of tourists into Georgia; of the 8.7 million international visitors to Georgia in 2018, 1.4 million (or 16.2 percent) came from Russia.

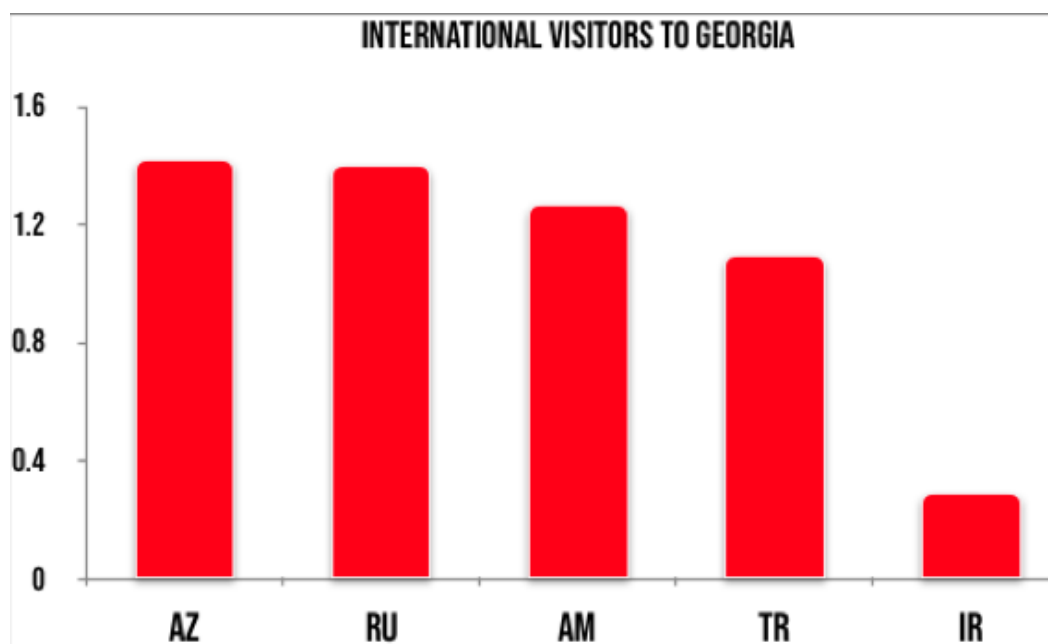
Russia also has accounted for a large share of the increase in visitors in recent years. Total international travellers increased by 51.3 percent between 2013 and 2018. During the same time visits from Russia more than doubled, from 606,668 to 1.4 million.

¹⁹¹ Ferrari, A. Limes, *Il Caucaso di Aleksandr Puškin*, available at: <https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/il-caucaso-di-aleksandr-puskin>.

¹⁹² Raspopina, S. *Georgia on my mind: How Russian trendsetters fell in love with Tbilisi and why soon you will too*, available at: <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/5826/georgia-tbilisi-russian-trendsetters-tourism>.

Between 2017 and 2018 alone, the number of Russian visitors to Georgia grew by 23.8 percent. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), tourism contributed 33.7 percent to Georgia’s total GDP in 2018¹⁹³.

As aforementioned, tourism also contributes significantly to employment in Georgia. WTTC statistics show that the tourism sector was responsible for creating (directly and indirectly) 519,700 jobs in the Georgian economy in 2018. That represents 23 percent of jobs in Georgia¹⁹⁴.



As a result of Putin’s flight ban to Georgia, many Georgians used social media to call on their foreign friends to spend summer in Georgia. “My dear friends, please plan your vacation in Georgia this summer,” internationally renowned Georgian mezzo-soprano, Anita Rachvelishvili, wrote on her Facebook page. Yet, a well-known Georgian footballer, Guram Kashia, who used to play for the Dutch club Vitesse, invited his fans and friends to visit Georgia via Instagram to support his country: “Dutch friends: go to

¹⁹³ *Russian Travel Embargo to Georgia will Impact Tourism*, available at: <https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/russian-travel-embargo-georgia-will-impact-tourism/>.

¹⁹⁴ Available at: <https://traveltourism.news/measuring-the-impact-of-russias-tourism-embargo-on-georgia/>.

Georgia to finally see a proper mountain (even though I love your flat country),” he wrote¹⁹⁵.

Support came also from foreign politicians. Foreign diplomats, including the Lithuanian and British ambassadors, called on people to visit Georgia and supported a social media campaign under the hashtag #SpendSummerInGeorgia. The Georgian Orthodox Church called on its parishioners to spend their summer vacations in Georgia and asked the banking industry to ease conditions for borrowers to help the struggling tourism business¹⁹⁶.

There was information about a reduction of Russian tourists in Georgia by 70%, however it was not true. The National Georgian Tourism Administration (GNAT) says the decline in tourist flow was much smaller as a result of the Russian travel embargo on flights. Overall, the number of Russian tourists was 14.8% (18,851) less than in the same period of 2018. The 14% decline in tourist arrivals was reported as a 70% decrease by Russian media.

In July 2019, there were 159,063 Russian visitors to Georgia: 6.4% less than in the same period in 2018, of which 50,849 were transit visitors and 108,214 were tourists.

Moreover, the article does not mention that in July a record number of visitors and tourists were received in Georgia. According to the Tourism Administration, Georgia's tourism sector in July grew by 5.8%, totalizing 1,099,474 visitors. There has been an increase in the number of tourists from many other countries too, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and others. There was also a positive trend from EU countries.

The United Airports of Georgia of the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development said that, in July 2019, all five Georgian airports -Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Mestia, Ambrolauri- served 571, 848 passengers, which is 44,959 passengers less (7.3%) compared to July 2018 (616,807 passengers).

¹⁹⁵ Lomsadze, G. *Georgia braces for exodus of Russian tourists*, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-braces-for-exodus-of-russian-tourists>.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 193

A 7.3% drop in passenger traffic was triggered by suspension of direct flights to and from Russia from July 8, 2019. According to the official data, in July 2019 Tbilisi International Airport served 384,632 passengers, which is about 10% less compared to the same period of the previous year.

The number of passengers decreased also at Batumi International Airport. In July 2019, 100,432 passengers were served by Batumi Airport which is 10,893 passengers less than in the same period of the previous year.

However, unlike Tbilisi and Batumi, the Kutaisi International Airport saw a 14% increase in passenger traffic. In July 2019, 85,738 passengers were served at the airport. In July 2018, the airport served 75,372.

Georgia's Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Natia Turnava says that despite the 7.3% decrease of passengers in July, the total number of visitors in seven months of this year increased by 12%. The Minister added that the government is doing its best to neutralize the consequences of the Russian embargo on flights.

A few days ago, Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze noted that due to the Russian ban on direct flights with Georgia, the tourism sector saw around a \$60 million loss last month. "However, the steps we have taken make me believe we will return to the strong dynamics we had," the PM said¹⁹⁷.

¹⁹⁷ Morrison, T. Russian Exaggerates Impact of Flight Ban on Georgian Tourism, available at: <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/16919/Russian-Exaggerates-Impact-of-Flight-Ban-on-Georgian-Tourism>.

CHAPTER 6

THE SITUATION NOWADAYS: A NEW BREAKDOWN OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MOSCOW AND TBILISI

6.1 - THE JUNE 2019 WAVE OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT AND ANTI-RUSSIA PROTESTS

One year ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections, Georgia is experiencing a serious political crisis that has exposed deep flaws in the rule of Georgian Dream (GD) and its illusive reconciliation with Russia. The visit of a Russian lawmaker to Georgia's Parliament in June sparked outrage across the country and fuelled widespread disappointment with the ruling party's policies. The parliamentary scandal delivered a serious blow to the government's approval ratings and its hallmark policy of rapprochement with Russia. This is a worrying trend for the ruling party, which is seeking a third consecutive term but increasingly compromises democratic principles in order to stay in power¹⁹⁸.

On the 20th June 2019 Georgia's Parliament hosted a meeting of the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy (IAO), which aims to foster ties between lawmakers from Orthodox Christian countries. The events took an unexpected turn when Russian Duma deputy Sergey Gavrilov addressed the assembly from the parliamentary speaker's seat, sparking a furious reaction from Georgia's political opposition and many members of the Georgian public, who started to gather on the square in front of the parliament. Many Georgians felt that the ruling party completely ignored popular sensitivities by inviting a Russian lawmaker to speak in the national Parliament while Russia continues to occupy a substantial portion of Georgia's territory¹⁹⁹.

¹⁹⁸ Konarzewska, N. *Political Turbulence in Georgia One Year Before Elections*, available at: cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13587-political-turbulence-in-georgia-one-year-before-elections.html.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 198

Salome Samadashvili, member of UNM party, addressed citizens to “protect the dignity of Georgia”, mobilizing 15 Georgian NGO such as Transparency International Georgia and Open Society Georgia Foundation, which are particularly active and powerful in Georgia, which stated that it is necessary to answer to the intensifying hybrid warfare perpetrated by Russia to regain full influence control of Georgia²⁰⁰.

During the protests, anti-Russian slogans and symbols appeared; this, together with a speech by the President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili calling Russia “an enemy and an occupier” provoked sharp reactions from Moscow, including a statement by President Putin’s spokesman Dmitri Peskov which spoke of “a Russophobic provocation”²⁰¹.

The protesters were supported by opposition deputies from United National Movement (UNM) and European Georgia (EG) political parties, who called for the dismissal of several top Georgian Dream politicians, including the Speaker of Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze, Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze and Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia. The demonstrators also demanded snap elections and the introduction of a fully proportional electoral system, which would increase the electoral chances of smaller parties. In the night of June 20, police used force to disperse the protesters by firing rubber bullets into the crowd and using tear gas, wounding 240 people. Hundreds of protesters were arrested for resisting law enforcement²⁰².

Apparently, GD had completely misunderstood public sentiment and was unprepared for such a drastic outburst of popular discontent. Ruling party top politicians admitted that inviting a Russian lawmaker to the Georgian Parliament was a serious mistake and condemned the incident. It is difficult to determine whether the Georgian government and top deputies of the ruling party wittingly accepted Gavrillov’s address or were deceived by the Russian delegation, but the program and agenda of the IAO meeting was approved by Georgian authorities and key lawmakers, such as the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament who should have predicted its implications.

²⁰⁰ Dominioni, S. & Ambrosetti E. *Proteste in Georgia: dove nasce la tensione*, available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/proteste-georgia-dove-nasce-la-tensione-23349>.

²⁰¹ Górecki, W. *Georgia: internal tensions and a new crisis in relations with Russia*, Centre for Eastern Studies, available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2019-06-26/georgia-internal-tensions-and-a-new-crisis-relations-russia>.

²⁰² Ibid. 198

Following the parliamentary incident, GD's ranks were decimated by several high-profile resignations including GD lawmaker Zakhariy Kutsnashvili, the head of Georgia's delegation to IAO who was responsible for inviting the Russian deputies to Georgia, as well as Speaker Kobakhidze. GD founder and leader Bidzina Ivanishvili announced that the 2020 parliamentary elections will be held using proportional party lists, even though the existing mixed proportional-majoritarian system was scheduled to last until 2024, when the recent constitutional changes will come into force. Moreover, the electoral threshold will be cancelled. These concessions did not cause the protests to end; however, participation was significantly reduced compared to the height of demonstrations on June 20-24. In the aftermath of the protests, several opposition lawmakers were charged with using force against the police during the demonstrations²⁰³.

In late July, UNM suffered another blow as the European Court of Human Rights confirmed the transfer of opposition-friendly TV channel Rustavi-2 to its previous owner. The politically intense summer ended with the surprising resignation of Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze on September 2 and a cabinet reshuffle. A few days later, the parliament appointed former Minister of Interior Giorgi Gakharia to the post. Gakharia, whose candidature was put forward by Ivanishvili himself, is a highly controversial figure due to his role in the violent crackdown on the June protests²⁰⁴.

The parliamentary scandal and the ensuing mass protests damaged GD's reputation and exposed further flaws in Georgia's democratization process. The brutal crackdown on protesters was particularly problematic given that GD came to power after a successful campaign criticizing the heavy-handed methods of their predecessors. Moreover, the appointment of Gakharia, who is blamed for excessive use of force against demonstrators in June, was a highly confrontational move, which has already sparked social protests. Nevertheless, Gakharia is one of Ivanishvili's most trusted associates and his nomination comes at a time when the party is gearing up for elections. The infamous Duma deputy Sergey Gavrilov expressed hope that the new Prime Minister will find a

²⁰³ Ibid. 201

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 198

way to fix relations with Russia, suggesting that Gakharia was appointed to placate Moscow²⁰⁵.

The mass protests exposed that GD's reconciliation with Russia is illusive and delivered a blow to the government's hallmark policy of rapprochement with Moscow. Russian authorities reacted harshly to the rallies in Tbilisi and introduced a temporary ban on flights between the countries at the outset of the summer season, ostensibly to ensure the safety of Russian tourists, and tightened control over imported Georgian wine. Russian forces also continue the so-called borderization of Georgia's territory around the administrative border of the separatist region South Ossetia. The latest such incident took place on August 8 in Gugutiantkari village in Gori municipality.

Therefore, starting from July 8th, 2020, not only flights from and to Russia were blocked, but also organized trips and a strong recommendation to all Russian citizens in Georgia of being repatriated to Russia for their safety²⁰⁶. With this move, Putin tried to hit a decisive blow to Georgian economy, considering that Russian tourists in Georgia provide a huge income to the country, since Russia is the state which bring more tourists in Georgia²⁰⁷.

Nevertheless, this move has proved to be a double-edged sword because it hit Georgian economy, but not as much as expected. Russian people love Georgia, and they kept travelling to Georgia by car or buses. Moreover, the cut of Russian tourism made Georgia turn its look to Europe even more, investing in advertisements and promoting tourism from Europe towards Georgia. That is why, from 2019 the flow of European citizens to Georgia has increased much.

One year ahead of Georgia's parliamentary elections, GD finds itself between a rock and a hard place, and will likely continue to employ heavy-handed methods against the opposition as well as populist gestures in the pre-election period to gather social support. Mounting pressure from Russia is complicating matters further, since Moscow visibly exploits the political turmoil in Georgia to its own benefit. The fragmented and weak opposition is largely unable to challenge the ruling party, yet social protests in 2018

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 198

²⁰⁶ Tilman, A. *GEORGIA: Le proteste continuano, intervieni Putin*, available at: <https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/98726>.

²⁰⁷ Official data, available at: <https://gnta.ge/statistics/>.

and 2019 have mobilized many young people who seek change outside of the country's typically polarized party politics. Mobilization of these young citizens could potentially change Georgia's political landscape in the years to come²⁰⁸.

6.2 - THE 2020 GEORGIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: TURMOIL AND ALLEGATIONS OF RIGGED ELECTIONS

Months before the October 2020 polls, GD's electoral prospects seemed highly uncertain. Many observers predicted that Georgia's ruling party, which had experienced a serious voter fatigue and a deep image crisis, was unlikely to win the majority for a third time in a row – something that no political party in Georgia has ever achieved since the country's independence. Surveys indicated that GD had steadily lost public support since the previous parliamentary elections in 2016, which GD won decisively by securing 49 percent of the vote. In January 2020, the ruling party's approval ratings were as low as 20 percent. Public support for key GD or GD-affiliated politicians had also fallen significantly²⁰⁹.

This downward trend was driven by domestic discontent as Georgians became frustrated with GD's inability to tackle pervasive economic problems, growing corruption and nepotism. Infringements on judicial and media independence have also been serious concerns. Surveys conducted ahead of the October polls clearly indicated that a significant number of respondents would prefer a coalition to a one-party government, suggesting that Georgian voters view the system of concentrated power in their country as erosive to democracy and state institutions. Despite the voter fatigue, GD proved able to win the elections; however, it increased the use of questionable tactics to stay in power²¹⁰.

The most serious blow to GD's reputation came in June last year (2019), when the ruling party decided to violently disperse large-scale protests that erupted after its MPs

²⁰⁸ Ibid. 198

²⁰⁹ Konarzewska, N. *Georgian Dream Claim Third Consecutive Victory in Parliamentary Elections*, available at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13647-georgian-dream-claim-third-consecutive-victory-in-parliamentary-elections.html>.

²¹⁰ Ibid. 209

invited a delegation with Russian Duma lawmaker Sergei Gavrilov to the Georgian parliament, allowing him to address the deputies from the parliamentary speaker's seat. Russia reacted firmly to the protests, which it deemed anti-Russian. Russia also banned direct flights to Georgia at the height of the holiday season and introduced restrictions on Georgian wine imports. The parliamentary scandal and its aftermath seriously undermined GD's image as a political party that seeks reconciliation with Russia and avoids using heavy-handed methods against citizens²¹¹.

A few months ahead of the elections, the negative trend in GD's ratings was reversed. Some observers have that this was likely due to the government's successful early response to the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak, curbing the number of infections and deaths. During this difficult time, the country experienced a "rally-around-the-flag" moment and citizens largely supported a strict lockdown despite its serious economic and social consequences²¹².

The lack of other viable political options is another likely reason for GD's election victory. For years, the weakened United National Movement (UNM), which is the largest opposition party, has been unable to challenge GD despite the diminishing public support for the ruling party. So far, no significant third political power has emerged that would be able to break the GD-UNM duopoly and put an end to the politics of personality, embodied in the conflict between the two arch-rivals Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikheil Saakashvili²¹³.

Forming a united bloc or election coalition would have been a feasible option for the opposition, had GD not won majority under the new voting system and been unable to form a government. Yet, in reality, a broad coalition of opposition forces would have been hard to achieve due to several disagreements within opposition ranks. The main bone of contention was Saakashvili's candidacy for the Prime Minister post put forward by UNM, which the other opposition parties rejected. Before the elections, the opposition was only able to reach an agreement that envisaged nominating common candidates in

²¹¹ Ibid. 209

²¹² Ibid. 209

²¹³ Ibid. 209

Tbilisi's majoritarian districts, supporting each other's candidates in the run-offs in the regions, and carrying out judicial and economic reforms in case GD would step down²¹⁴.

According to official data from Georgia's Central Election Commission (CEC), the election results are as follows: GD received 48.22 percent of the vote; UNM, 27.18 percent; European Georgia (EG), 3.79 percent; Lelo for Georgia (LG), 3.15 percent; Strategy Agmashenebeli, 3.15 percent; Alliance of Patriots (AP), 3.14 percent; the Libertarian Party "Girchi", 2.89 percent; the "Citizens" party, 1.33 percent; and the Georgian Labor Party (GLP), 1 percent²¹⁵.

With these results, the ruling party has a significant chance of securing a simple majority in the parliament and form the government independently. After the first round of elections on October 31, GD won 61 mandates via proportional lists and 14 mandates in single-mandate constituencies, which in total gives it 75 seats in the 150-seat parliament. GD candidates are also projected to win in 15 out of 16 majoritarian constituencies, which are scheduled for a runoff on November 21²¹⁶.

Since the adoption of the 1995 constitution, only one party has received the majority of mandates in parliament and, accordingly, a monopoly on government formation. In 1995-2003, the Union of Citizens of Georgia headed by Eduard Shevardnadze had a monopoly on power. In 2003-2012 it was the United National Movement headed by Mikheil Saakashvili. Since 2012, Georgian Dream has been in control. Today, multiple surveys indicate that the population is tired of such political monopolies but is still hesitant about drawing in other actors and parties²¹⁷.

Georgia has a high number of undecided voters. According to a public opinion poll this summer (2020) by Edison Research, over 20 percent of voters have yet to decide who to vote for in the upcoming parliamentary election. Also this summer, a survey project by the International Republican Institute (IRI) found the number to be as high as 50 percent. Capturing the choices of neutral voters is the main objective of the

²¹⁴ Ibid. 209

²¹⁵ Data available at: <https://cesko.ge/eng/list/show/123458-tsentrallurma-saarchevno-komisiam-saqartvelos-parlamentis-2020-tslis-31-oqtombris-archevnebi-sheadjama>.

²¹⁶ Ibid. 209

²¹⁷ Cheda, B. *October 2020 Parliamentary Elections: Georgia at the Crossroads*, available at: <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/ru/node/10953>.

traditional parties and, at the same time, a strong incentive for the creation of new political structures²¹⁸.

Recently, many new parties have been created that claim to offer an alternative or a “third party” choice. For example, the Lelo party was created by famous Georgian businessman and multi-millionaire Mamuka Khazaradze, along with several other new parties that have also been vying for the status of fresh and new. They position themselves in opposition to both the current authorities and to the official opposition party, United National Movement. But when it comes to being “new forces,” Lelo, for example, has among its leaders a former parliamentary chairman, former parliamentary members from Georgian Dream, advisers that served fourth president Giorgi Margvelashvili, former high-ranking officials from the administration of third president Saakashvili, and a privileged businessman (and former personal pilot) of second president Shevardnadze. Such new political bodies look like outdated products in new packaging²¹⁹.

As polls show, despite efforts to form a third force in the country before the October elections, the main rival parties will be Georgian Dream and United National Movement. Since 2012, Georgian Dream has been trying hard to drive its rival out of the field, which has included behind-the-scenes efforts to create new, alternative forces that could play roles as “constructive” opposition. For example, over the past year, many members of parliament have split from Georgian Dream. Some have created their own parties. While they may never personally criticize Ivanishvili, they often criticize United National Movement. At a pre-election public event this month, leaders from the current ruling party and the country’s defense minister clamoured that the removal of United National Movement from politics was “an overall national task²²⁰.”

According to the constitutional changes approved at the end of June 2020, which were based on the demands of the opposition and under pressure from Western partners, Georgian Dream’s chances of forming a parliamentary majority have been sharply reduced. Previously, the ruling party took a parliamentary majority with the help of majority members of parliament. In the upcoming election, 120 deputies will be

²¹⁸ Ibid. 217

²¹⁹ Ibid. 217

²²⁰ Ibid. 217

elected from party lists (rather than 77) and only 30 deputies from single-seat majoritarian electoral districts (rather than 73). The reduction in the number of majoritarian electoral districts will weaken the position of Georgian Dream because, traditionally, in almost all majoritarian districts, government candidates always win (thanks to bribery, informal local ties, etc.)²²¹.

Moreover, the authorities, on their own initiative, introduced another amendment that lowered the electoral threshold from 5 to 1 percent: “mandates... shall be distributed to the political parties that receive at least 1 percent of the valid votes of the voters, and to the electoral blocs of those political parties.” In conditions of low support and with less majoritarian electoral districts, a 1 percent barrier would encourage Georgian Dream to promote other, smaller parties during the elections. Its strategists hope this manipulation will succeed in forming a parliamentary majority and a pro-government coalition government. The introduction of the 1 percent barrier indicates that the ruling party is no longer confident in its own success in the October elections. Thus, one of the likely scenarios it considers after the elections is the creation of a coalition government together with loyal and satellite small parties²²².

During the 2016 parliamentary elections, only 3 parties were able to pass the 5 percent threshold: Georgian Dream with 44 mandates (48 percent), United National Movement with 27 mandates (27 percent), and Alliance of Patriots with 6 mandates (5.01 percent). Under the new rules and 1 percent barrier, the situation with the entry into play of many other smaller parties, which brought more representation at the political level²²³.

Most Georgian political parties are pro-Western and support the country’s integration with NATO and the EU. The exceptions are Alliance of Patriots and Democratic Movement United Georgia, which are both “pro-Russia” parties²²⁴. The first party is led by David Tarkhan-Mouravi, who claims to be the heir of several branches of the royal dynasty of Georgia at once. He was also a former official under Shevardnadze. The party has another leader, Irma Inashvili, who is the current vice-speaker of

²²¹ Ibid. 217

²²² Ibid. 217

²²³ Ibid. 217

²²⁴ For further information check “*Russian Watchdog: Kremlin Interferes in Georgia Polls, Aids Alliance of Patriots*”, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/363628>.

parliament. She is a former journalist, adores Russia, and hates the United States/NATO²²⁵. The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia is a pro-Russian political party which supports renewing relations with Russia and refusing to join NATO, and it is known for its homophobic stances and anti-Western rhetoric²²⁶. Its leaders also talk up the Russian Orthodox Church's links to Georgia²²⁷ and warn that closer integration with Europe could damage Georgian traditions²²⁸. The other party is led by Nino Burjanadze, who was the acting president of Georgia during the 2003 Rose Revolution. Alliance of Patriots receives some support from the ruling party, but, all in all, neither party is popular with the electorate. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, Alliance of Patriots managed to overcome the 5 percent barrier allegedly thanks to some selective manipulations and the informal financial and political support²²⁹ from the partly pro-Russian Georgian Dream²³⁰, which shares position on many issues including relations with Russia²³¹.

As for political ideology, Georgian Dream positions itself as social-democratic while United National Movement claims it is centrist/center-right. However, in the past, as the ruling party, it was more right-flank. To touch briefly on several others, Alliance of Patriots leans ultra-nationalist, European Georgia is liberal, and Girchi is ultra-liberal and advocates for the abolition of state institutions. Lelo should have a right-wing orientation, but among its leaders there are left-wing activists. The leader of Citizen/Civil Movement rejects any ideology and calls only for "service to the people"²³². All parties are characterized by populism. The main point in the current analysis is that the opposition parties collectively could get more votes than the current ruling party, giving a chance for the formation of a coalition government for the first time in the country's history. Will

²²⁵ Ibid. 217

²²⁶ Available at: <https://jam-news.net/alliance-of-patriots-abkhazia-visit-lasha-sakania/>.

²²⁷ For further information check "Visit to Abkhazia, election campaign – what Russian consultants have planned for Georgia's Alliance of Patriots", available at: <https://jam-news.net/visit-to-abkhazia-election-campaign-what-russian-consultants-have-planned-for-georgias-alliance-of-patriots/>.

²²⁸ Antidze, M., *Pro-Russian party wins a toe-hold in Georgia's new parliament*, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-election-idUSKCN12B1XF>.

²²⁹ See: Beka Chedia, "The battle of the USSR in Georgia rages on" *New Eastern Europe*, January-March 2020, p. 53.

²³⁰ Ibid. 217

²³¹ *Opposition believes that "Alliance of Patriots" is backed by "Georgian Dream"*, available at: <https://www.rustavi2.ge/en/news/81046>.

²³² Ibid. 217

they unite against Georgian Dream, or will some create a coalition with it? This will largely depend on the personal ambitions of the party leaders²³³.

Transparency International Georgia monitored the 31 October 2020 parliamentary elections with some 600 local observers. The analysis of the 170 violations that has been recorded and the 46 complaints that has been filed makes it clear that the 31 October elections were a step back compared with the 2016 parliamentary elections.

The election day was marked by physical confrontations outside the polling stations, obstruction of the work of observers and journalists, including physical attacks on journalists and damaging of their property, violation of the secrecy of vote in the polling stations, alleged instances of bribing of the voters, and other significant and relatively insignificant violations.

The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) published the initial preliminary election results 7.5 hours after the closing of the polling stations, which represents deterioration of the practice established during the elections over the last eight years and gave the opposition parties a reason to suspect that manipulation had occurred in the announcement of the results. The CEC members appointed by the opposition parties protested against this and obstructed the announcement of the results by the CEC Chairwoman²³⁴.

All other parties that passed the threshold have refused to accept the official results, accusing Georgian Dream of stealing the vote through bribery, intimidation and falsification²³⁵.

The day after the election, opposition leaders led their supporters in a march to the hilltop home of Georgian Dream's billionaire chairman, Bidzina Ivanishvili. A rowdy protest rally was held in front of Ivanishvili's glass palace, which was guarded by police cordons.

²³³ Ibid. 217

²³⁴ Summary of Monitoring of 31 October 2020 Parliamentary Elections, available at: <https://transparency.ge/en/post/summary-monitoring-31-october-2020-parliamentary-elections>.

²³⁵ Lomsadze, G. *Contested Georgian vote results in opposition boycott*, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/contested-georgian-vote-results-in-opposition-boycott>.

“We are not going to let Ivanishvili steal the choice made by the Georgian people,” said ex-president and UNM leader Saakashvili in televised comments from Ukraine, encouraging supporters to “fight” to defend their votes. “He is stealing the fate of Georgia and the fate of every one of you”. International observers said that while they did detect a number of irregularities, including the use of administrative resources by the ruling party, they said the results were nevertheless generally free and competitive²³⁶.

In a November 1 statement the main international monitoring mission, led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, said that the 31 October parliamentary elections were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected²³⁷.

International observers were also skeptical of the opposition’s decision to immediately challenge the voting results. “To challenge the results of the elections on the day of the elections is [...] not a sign of a mature democracy,” said Dutch politician Tiny Kox, who represented the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in its observation mission. He urged the parties to wait for the final results and to stick to legal avenues for addressing irregularities²³⁸.

But the opposition groups said they had seen enough evidence to declare that the Georgian Dream stole the vote. They have promised continued protests to pressure the authorities for a rerun²³⁹.

“I hope they will come to their senses and stay in the election process, and then take part in the parliament’s work,” said Giorgi Kakhiani, vice speaker of Georgian Dream, on November 2²⁴⁰.

There have been 450 complaints of violations of electoral procedures lodged with the election authorities so far. Even if all these complaints are upheld, Georgian Dream will still maintain its lead, Kakhiani argued²⁴¹.

²³⁶ Ibid. 235

²³⁷ Ibid. 235

²³⁸ Ibid. 235

²³⁹ Ibid. 235

²⁴⁰ Ibid. 235

²⁴¹ Ibid. 235

But Georgian Dream is set to have the parliament all to itself following the mass boycott. As UNM representative Nika Melia said: “We are not going to enter that thing [...] which only Bidzina Ivanishvili calls a parliament”²⁴².

Following weekend clashes with riot police, crowds gathered again in the center of Georgia’s capital on November 9 to demand fresh parliamentary elections, defying a fresh wave of COVID-19 cases and health officials’ pleas to stay at home.

Protesters who gathered outside parliament on November 9 said they would defy the 10 p.m. curfew and spend the night in the streets²⁴³.

Despite initial hopes, for now the new voting system is unlikely to pave the way for a coalition government that could put an end to one-party politics in Georgia. The possibility of GD consolidating power for the third term in a row raises acute concerns that without decisive pressure from Georgia’s Western partners, GD will continue to slide away from the rule of law. The coming months will be particularly challenging for GD as Georgia is simultaneously experiencing a political crisis over the election results, a particularly severe second wave of COVID-19, and a burgeoning economic crisis. Tbilisi also faces a looming security concern following the recent ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers there, which will strengthen Moscow’s posture in the South Caucasus²⁴⁴.

The recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in 2020, ended up with a peace mediated by Russia, with large-scale consequences. Russia and Turkey gained increased power in the region, while Iran’s leverage in the region declined. The war outcomes also strengthened domestic challenges from Iran’s large ethnic Azerbaijani community, which opposed Tehran’s support for Armenia in the war²⁴⁵.

²⁴² Ibid. 235

²⁴³ Lomsadze, G. *Election clashes, COVID deepen crisis in Georgia*, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/election-clashes-covid-deepen-crisis-in-georgia>.

²⁴⁴ Konarzewska, N. *Georgian Dream Claim Third Consecutive Victory in Parliamentary Elections*, available at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13647-georgian-dream-claim-third-consecutive-victory-in-parliamentary-elections.html>.

²⁴⁵ Shaffer, B., *The Armenia-Azerbaijan War: Downgrading Iran’s Regional Role*, available at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13650-the-armenia-azerbaijan-war-downgrading-iran%E2%80%99s-regional-role.html>.

The new security architecture for the South Caucasus will see an increased role for Russia and Turkey, with no new formal role for Iran. Under a Moscow-brokered agreement, Moscow has deployed Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the Lachin Corridor, which connects the region to Armenia. The accord also establishes a joint ceasefire monitoring center manned by Russian and Turkish forces²⁴⁶.

The post-war agreement also leads to the deployment of additional Russian troops in close proximity to Armenia's border with Iran. While Russian forces already control Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran, the countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia agreed to establish of a safe passage corridor, passing through Armenian territory, which links Azerbaijan with its exclave Nakhchevan. Russian forces will patrol a road, in proximity to the border with Iran, to secure Azerbaijani access through this region. The establishment of this safe passage corridor could lessen Azerbaijan's dependence on Iran for travel and for the transit of goods to Nakhchevan²⁴⁷.

Russia and Turkey's snubbing of Iran may reflect larger strains in the relationships between Moscow and Tehran, and Ankara and Tehran. While Russia and Iran are often viewed by the West as allies, Moscow clearly did not create any role for Iran in the post-war security arrangements in the Caucasus. The post-war security design in the South Caucasus improved the position of Russia and Turkey, while creating challenges for Iran, both foreign and domestic. Russia and Turkey's treatment of Iran may indicate larger rifts in each's bilateral relationship with Tehran²⁴⁸.

The situation in Nagorno Karabakh, and therefore in Armenia and Azerbaijan, is to be kept under close observation, because it has directly consequences in Georgia too, not only because of the presence of large communities of ethnic Azeri and Armenians, but also because Georgia is affected by all the three regional powers: Turkey, Iran and, of course, Russia.

²⁴⁶ Ibid. 245

²⁴⁷ Ibid. 245

²⁴⁸ Ibid. 245

CONCLUSION

This thesis tries to describe all the main aspects which shaped the relationships between two totally different neighbouring countries, namely Russia and Georgia, although focusing more on the Georgian side timescale. I think it is an important topic to reflect on mainly because of two reasons: in the first place because Russia is trying to become again a world power, influencing the former USSR countries, South Caucasus included. The second reason is that Georgia, as well as the entire region, has gained more and more relevance in the international chessboard during the last two decades.

Throughout the writing of the dissertation, I have read tens of sources which have helped me develop a deep knowledge of the topic and the situation in the region, as well as the idea that both parties are to blame for the situation: equally Russia and Georgia acted in a way that increased tension.

This study, which encompasses a detailed description of the events starting from the 2008 August War until the most recent Parliamentary elections in Georgia, aims to be a solid starting point for students, experts and researchers who want to specialize in the Caucasus region and who want to find a solution to the situation in the two breakaway territories.

In this essay it is clear how the situation changed: from a breaking down of relations in 2008, to a reopening of a dialogue from 2012 with the Georgian Dream party election and yet, to a worsening of the relations in 2019, caused by anti-Russian protests. The circumstances shown in this paper demonstrate that a dialogue is possible between the parties involved, Abkhazia and South Ossetia included, however actors have to understand that they must compromise in order to find a solution, they could not achieve an agreement which utterly fulfil the interests of all sides.

It is important to underline that dissatisfaction of Georgian people is addressed towards Putin and Russia's government, not Russian population in general, since they have daily interactions and they are friends. Russian citizens, on the other hand, love Georgia and Georgians: they love Georgian food and

wine, also thanks to the presence of several ethnic Georgian restaurants in Russia, and they gladly go to Georgia on vacation.

Therefore, the issue between the two countries lies in the inability of the two governments to find common lines, it is not a matter of hatred between peoples as it is the situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. That is why, in my opinion, an agreement which will end this stalemate could be signed in the next future.

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